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THE STAR OF FORTUNE

VOL. I.

THE STAR OF FORTUNE

A Story of the Indian Mutiny

BY

J. E. MUDDOCK, F.R.G.S.

AUTHOR OF

"THE DEAD MAN'S SECRET," "STORIES WEIRD AND WONDERFUL," "MAID
MARIAN AND ROBIN HOOD," "STORMLIGHT," "FOR GOD AND
THE CZAR," "FROM THE BOSOM OF THE DEEP," ETC.

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I.

LONDON: CHAPMAN AND HALL, LD.

1894

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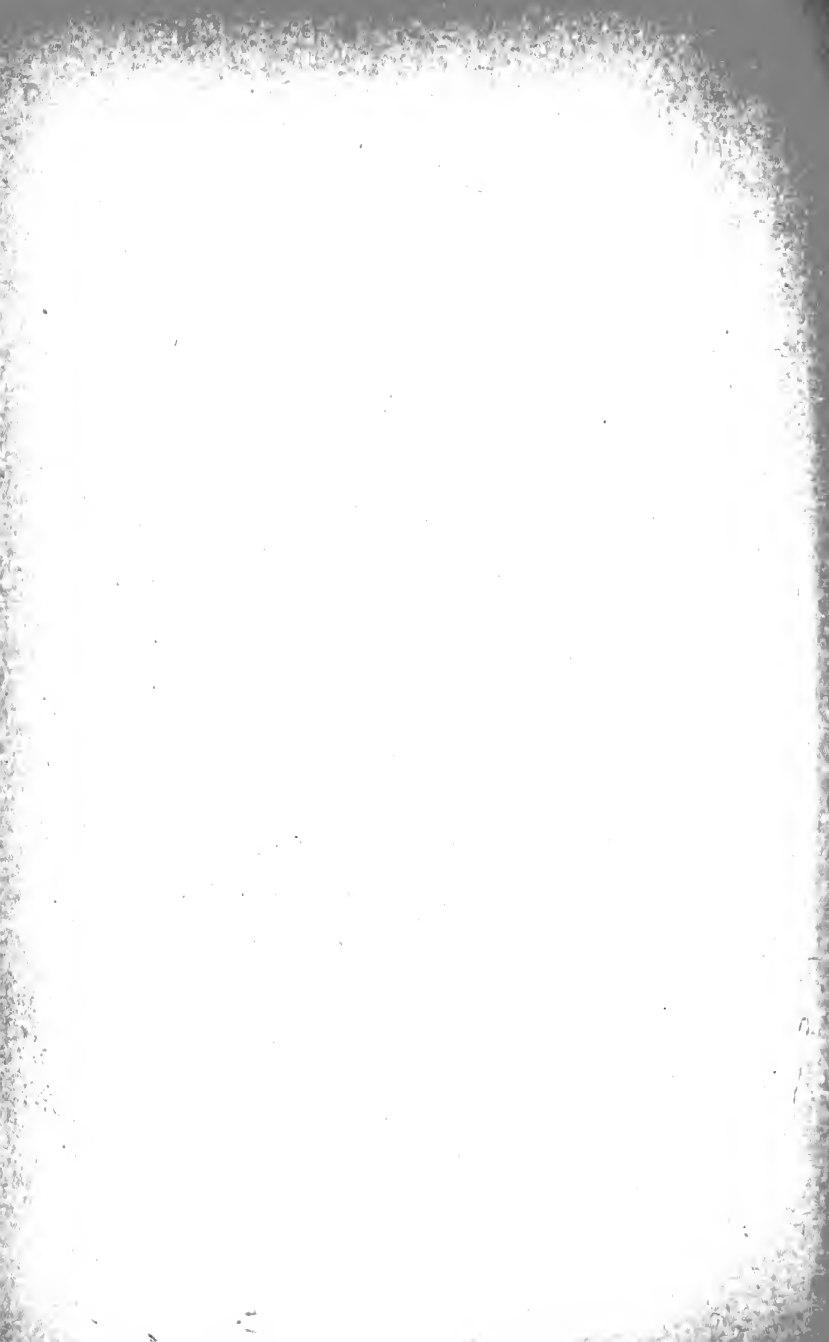
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NOTE.

It may add somewhat to the interest of this story if I state that during that tremendous struggle which nearly cost us our magnificent Indian Empire, I was stationed in India. I went through a very trying time, and though exceedingly young, met with many exciting adventures. Not a few of the scenes and incidents I record in the following narrative came under my own personal observation, and even at this distance of time they are still vivid in my memory.

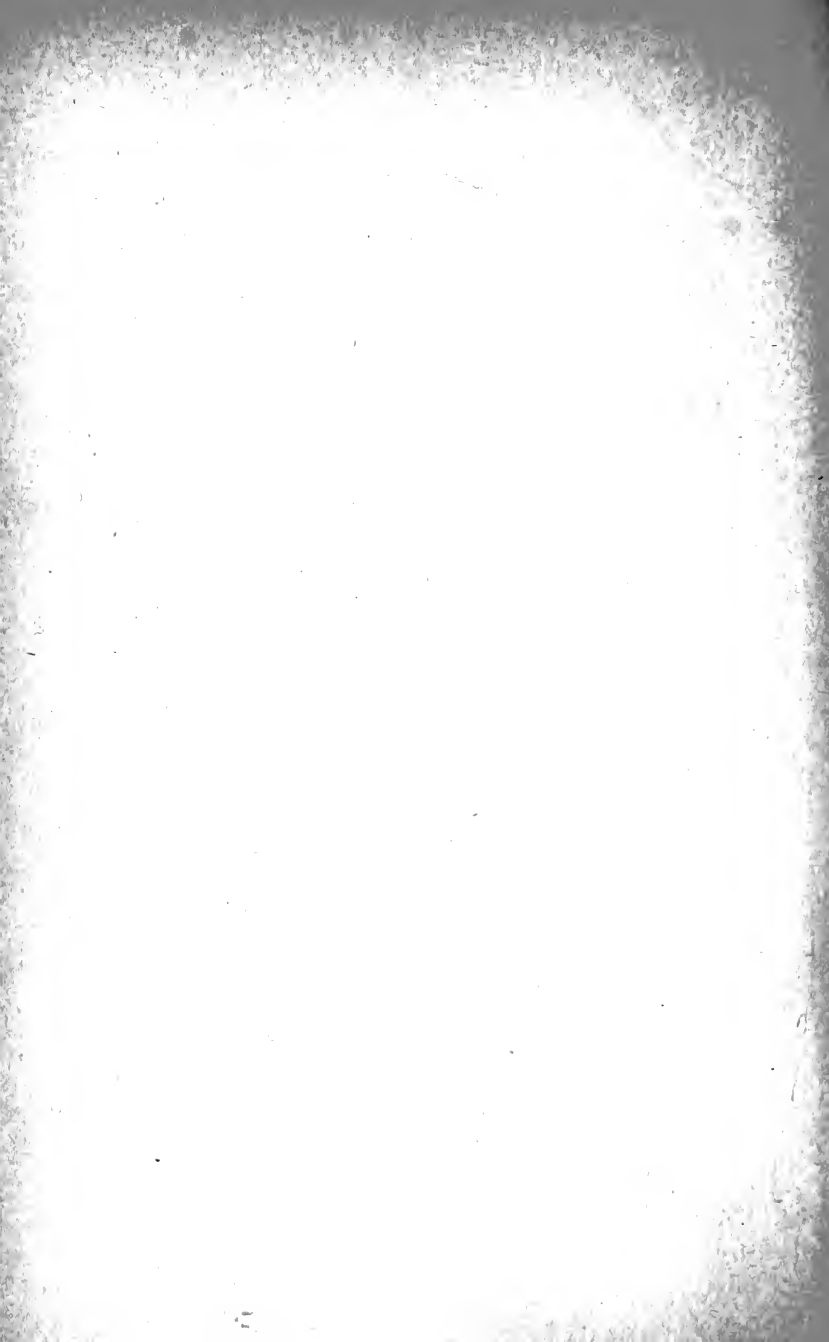
J. E. MUDDOCK.

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THE STAR OF FORTUNE.

CHAPTER I.

UNREASONING PREJUDICE.

“SWEET, sweet Dick, Dicky, come here, you rascal. Oh, you naughty boy, how dare you fly away like that when I want to catch you !”

These words were uttered in a clear, musical voice, by a young girl, who seemed radiant with health, and whom “the world’s slow stain” had not yet touched. The scene was a well-furnished room in which there was ample evidence that it was the sanctum of a woman of refined and cultivated taste ; and the room was part of a house situated in one of the best parts of

the classic city of Edinburgh. The speaker addressed her command and admonition to a very beautiful canary which had been liberated for the nonce from a brass cage that stood with open door on the table. But "Dick," in the fullness of his enjoyment of the temporary liberty thus accorded, had flown from point to point which afforded him foothold, such as picture frames and ornaments, and had resisted his pretty mistress's attempts to catch him in order that she might caress him.

It was a charming tableau, this girl and the bird, one that would have transferred well to canvas, and have made a gem under the deft hands of an artist of feeling and taste.

"You cruel, naughty Dicky, not to come to me," continued the young lady, with a pretty pout and an attempt at a frown that was altogether out of place on the fair, bright face. At this point the door opened and a gentleman entered, looking thoughtful, solemn, and even sad.

“Why, papa, whatever is the matter with you?” exclaimed the girl as she glanced at the intruder. “There is something wrong, for you have the tell-tale expression that so clearly denotes the state of your mind.”

“Yes, Hester, there is something wrong. I am troubled,” was the answer in a positively melancholy tone. “I want to talk seriously to you, but you had better put your bird into his cage again, for we cannot talk while he is flying about.”

“I had better take him from the room altogether if what you have to say is so dreadfully serious, and especially if you are going to be cross with me, for Dick is very sensitive, and would be frightened out of his life if he heard his mistress scolded.” The bird had alighted on the top of his cage, she managed to secure him, and, having pressed her lips to his bill and fondled him with many caresses, she placed him gently in his little prison-house, and put the cage on a table near the window which was gay

with ferns and flowers. "Now, dad, I'm ready," she said with a smile as she dropped into a chair and folded her hands.

"I am afraid, girl, you are hardly in that serious frame of mind which would be more in keeping with the circumstances," said her father, with some severity. "Indeed, I am sorry to notice the seeming levity with which you are disposed to treat everything."

"But surely, father, you wouldn't have me going about the house with a soured, Puritanical expression of face, as if this world and the beautiful things it contains were hateful to me. It was never intended, I am certain, that we should view life through a distorted medium of crabbed discontent."

"You do not understand me," he replied, with increased severity of tone, as though he considered that her expression of feeling was altogether out of place. "My remark applies to the present moment only. I have no desire that you should look at life through dun-coloured spectacles. Your

happiness is too precious to me, and it is my regard for your happiness that has induced me to act as I have done, and it is that act I now wish to discuss with you."

A little shadow of concern swept over his daughter's finely-cut face as some inkling of his meaning dawned upon her.

"What is the act, and what have you done?" she asked quickly.

"I have written to Lieutenant Hallett to tell him in a very emphatic manner that the intimacy between you and him must cease."

Hester's face grew red now, while a light of anger came into her eyes at this unexpected revelation; and there was an unusual warmth in her tone as she answered—

"Then, father, you must excuse me for saying that you have done that which you had no justification for doing."

"There you are wrong, girl. A father is justified in watching over the happiness and welfare of his child."

"But I am no longer a child," she exclaimed indignantly.

"Not in the literal sense, but for all purpose of argument in the present sense you are. At any rate, it cannot be expected that you should be able to form that dispassionate judgment of a matter in which the affections are concerned that I, your father, can, and there can be no doubt in my own mind that if this connection between you and Hallett is persisted in, it will be destructive of your own future welfare."

"Why?" she demanded, with a force of expression that seemed to cause him some astonishment.

"Because he is in every way unfitted to make you happy."

"Why, again?"

"Without going too much into detail, I may answer your question by saying that he is extravagant, reckless, unprincipled——"

"Unprincipled?"

"Yes. I am sorry if the word offends you, but I use it advisedly."

“In what way is he unprincipled?”

“In nearly every way in which that word can be applied. But more particularly in the lack of honourable regard for his actions, which any man who was proud of his reputation would certainly have.”

“This is a very serious charge, father,” said his daughter sadly, while her face assumed such a look of dejection that it presented a marked contrast to her appearance of a few minutes previously.

“I am fully alive to its seriousness,” he answered, “and I accept all the responsibility of my accusation, for it is an accusation. But, as I have said, it is your happiness I am consulting.”

“A curious way of consulting my happiness, truly,” she remarked sarcastically. “My happiness is bound up in Lieutenant Hallett, and yet you insult him and wound my feelings.”

“To say that I insult him is not correct. I have been to the trouble to learn a good deal

about his career, and I have no hesitation in saying that that career has been shameful and dishonourable. Therefore, to tell such a man the truth is not to insult him. As regards your feelings, it may be doubted if you are capable of rightly understanding even your own feelings, for girls of your age are generally led away by mere sentiment. There is such a thing as calf love, and that should not be mistaken for the genuine article."

"Well," replied his daughter dryly, "that may be your opinion, and I will not quarrel with you about it, but you will admit, as a just and upright man, that every one is liable to err—even you, my clever, precise, and usually accurate father."

"Yes, of course, I admit that; but in this case there is no error. I have convinced myself that Hallett is not a man who would do honour or credit to my family, and I must repeat again and again that if you were to marry him you would

rue the step as long as you lived. At any rate, the fact remains that I do not approve of him, and will not countenance your continuing a connection that is so distasteful to me, and so well calculated to cause you shame and misery. In speaking thus, I can have no other interests at heart but yours. If I were indifferent to you, I should allow you to take your own course and do as you like. But as your loving and affectionate father, I cannot sit still with folded arms and see your future destroyed. And you as my daughter must acknowledge my right to control you, unless you wish to set yourself in opposition to my desires and requests, in which case you would have to take your fate in your own hands."

"It is far from my intention," she answered, in a cool and collected way which suggested that, though young in years, she had the power when occasion required of acting and thinking as a matured woman of experience, "to set myself up in opposition to your just parental authority, but

I would point out that your charges against Hallett are too vague, too ambiguous for serious consideration——”

“This is absolutely insulting,” her father exclaimed, with unusual anger, for he felt that his judgment was being called into question and his rights as a father flouted.

“Pray hear me out. No good can result if this matter is discussed with warmth and temper. What I was going to say is this. I have never observed anything in Hallett’s conduct or speech but what was perfectly consistent with the character of a true gentleman and an upright and honest man. I gather from what you say that you have felt it necessary in my interest and out of a jealous regard for the good name of our family to inquire into the private character and past history of Lieutenant Hallett, and presumably you have been told certain things which induce you to believe that he is not a desirable person to know. Well, that may be the case, father, but in common fairness I must ask that you will request him to

come here, and in his presence that you will formulate a distinct charge against him, so that he may have full opportunity of answering it."

Mr. Dellaby looked at his daughter in astonishment. He knew that she had a far-seeing and reasoning mind, no less than a determined will, but he had always persuaded himself that in that household he was the supreme ruler, that his word and will were law, and that when he had once delivered judgment no one had any right to gainsay it. It was an unfortunate weakness that, and one which was in every way calculated to bring about the very discord he was so anxious to avoid. Herein, of course, he displayed the spirit of a martinet, a spirit which had been developed and fostered during long service in India, and to brook contradiction or questioning on the part of his daughter, whom he was unable to look upon in any other light than as a child incapable of forming a safe conclusion upon anything, was what he

could not do. Of course, this was very unreasonable and unfair, but he did not think, and probably nothing in the world could have persuaded him that it was so. Under these circumstances he must be credited with conscientiousness, for it cannot be supposed that such a man was actuated by mere malice or petty spite. He believed himself right, and men who believe that, however wrong they may be, are entitled to a certain amount of respectful consideration.

It was pretty clear from his manner that he had not anticipated such opposition from his daughter, and the frame of mind he was then in did not allow him to view the subject dispassionately or with a cool and unbiassed judgment, and this was the answer he made to her suggestion—

“I consider it outrageous that you should call my statements into question. The sources from whence I have drawn my information about this young man, who seems to have charmed away your usual

good sense and reasoning power, are above suspicion, therefore I should regard it as an act of imbecility were I to fall in with your view. Hallett shall never cross the threshold of my door again, and unless you wish to shut yourself out of my heart for ever and ever, you will regard my injunctions. I will not tolerate any disobedience on your part. Dare to go against my will, and I'll bar the door against you as sure as the heavens are above us. There is no appeal from Cæsar. Bear that in mind."

He had worked himself up to a pitch of unusual excitement, and appeared to have lost all control of himself, and having given this forcible expression to his views, he waited not for any answer or further comment from his daughter, but hastily left the room, feeling, no doubt, that he could not trust himself to prolong the argument then, for his anger had got the better of his discretion.

Poor Hester was terribly distressed. There were tears in her eyes, but she dashed them

away as being out of place on such an occasion. She had always been a loving daughter, and a dutiful daughter, but not even her love or sense of duty could blind her now to the manifest injustice of her father's behaviour. She was greatly put out, her feelings were wounded, and they found expression in a remark she addressed to her bird, which at that moment burst forth into a full gush of song, and, turning to the cage where the little songster trilled so beautifully, she murmured—

“Ah, Dick, happy Dicky; how I envy you! This world might be such a paradise if men were only more considerate, more reasonable. But, ‘Man’s inhumanity to man makes countless thousands mourn.’”

It was not often that she was cast down and dejected, for her disposition was a very happy and contented one; but now it was a question of forfeiting a lover's love or a father's affection. From the unexpected turn matters had taken, it seemed that she must certainly forfeit one or the other; it is little

wonder that she found it difficult to decide which she should do, and after much earnest consideration and deep reflection, she decided to go to her mother and seek consolation and sympathy from her.

CHAPTER II.

A MAIDEN FAIR.

It was generally admitted by those whose privilege it was to be well acquainted with her, that Hester Dellaby could justifiably claim to be numbered amongst the belles of which Edinburgh had cause to be proud. She had many natural advantages, such as good health, a good physique, and a bright, cheerful, engaging manner. There are some women who embody in the very highest degree the attributes of fascination, and who draw around them by some irresistible power of attraction other people, in much the same way as certain flowers attract butterflies and bees. Such a woman was Hester. Her years at this time were but a score, so that

she had all the advantages which youth offers, and allied to them was a sweetness of disposition, and a cheerful, even temper, which made her very popular with both sexes. She had been well nurtured, tenderly brought up, and educated with a view to her shining some day as an accomplished member of society, for her parents were ambitious, and a little given to boasting of the "good stock" they came from. Possibly the boast was justified, but anyway they ranked then amongst those who were pleased to think themselves members of "rank and fashion" in the so-called Northern Athens.

Hester's father had long and honourably served the Old East India Company in the Civil Service. He was a native of Edinburgh, though of English parents, and, marrying young, had gone out to India in the Company's employ. Three sons were born to him there, but two died in early childhood. The third grew up, and at the date of the commencement of this history he held a commission in the army, and was then stationed with

his regiment in Malta. In addition to these sons, Mr. Dellaby had two daughters; his eldest, Margaret, was born at sea while her mother was on her way home; and the second, Hester, drew her first breath in Edinburgh. Mr. Dellaby had at that time been compelled to leave India, as his health had broken down. Margaret subsequently became the wife of Lieutenant-Colonel George Henry Pritchard, and had gone out to India with her husband, so that Hester was her father's and mother's solace in their old age. A just and upright man, he was nevertheless a severe one where he considered there was any dereliction of duty, or a lack of obedience to lawful command, or what seemed to him lawful command. His wife had long been content to be guided by him, and she would have no more thought of calling his decisions into question than she would have thought of flying. She was a gentle, submissive woman, and believed that her husband could not err.

There was one point upon which Mr.

Dellaby was disposed to be very arbitrary indeed, and that was with reference to his daughter forming a connection with any one of the sterner sex. At first she had laughed at his petty tyranny, and was amused by his treating her as if she were still a little child. But this laughter and amusement underwent an entire change soon after she made the acquaintance of John Montague Hallett. They met at one of those little social gatherings, in which young people of both sexes are brought into contact with each other, and dream dreams of an earthly paradise. It is an impossible paradise, of course, but youth takes no count of that, for to the young nothing seems impossible, and they firmly believe that the mirage is reality and that shadow is substance. You greybeards and wise-acres may argue as much as you like, with a view to convincing them that they are wrong, but be assured you will fail.

In the case of these young people it was almost love at first sight. An hour or two

of each other's society, and then they both felt they had found their counterpart. A little later in the evening the hostess at whose house the gathering had taken place said to Hester—

“Well, dear, what do you think of young Hallett?”

At the question a little tell-tale flush dyed the girl's cheeks, and she answered demurely—

“He seems very nice.”

“He's *charming*, dear,” the hostess exclaimed. “He's my very ideal of what a young man should be—so different to the stuck-up, stiff-collared, pomatumed-haired fops of the present day, who would scream if they found themselves alone in a room with a mouse. I shouldn't be at all surprised if young Hallett makes a noise in the world some day. All his people have been prominent in one way or other, and he's got go and grit in him.”

This praise, which, by the way, was only a spontaneous testimony to Jack's worth,

and not uttered with any underlying motives such as often actuate ladies when they din the praises of young men into the ears of simpering maidens, had its effect on the listener, although she made no further comment one way or the other. But she had seen with her own eyes, and heard with her own ears, and she was quite capable of forming a perfectly independent judgment, though it may at once be said that her judgment was in accord in the main with that of her friend.

So it came to pass that the acquaintance thus begun ripened. Hallett gave every sign that he had come within the sphere of Hester's attraction, and was being drawn towards her as one orb that has got out of its orbit is drawn towards another. Opportunities were made for meetings, and after a time Jack was invited to Mr. Dellaby's house. Hester had a little gathering of friends, and he was included amongst the invitees. The attention he paid her that evening attracted the attention of her

parents, and her father subsequently questioned her about him. She concealed nothing, made no attempt to prevaricate. She told the pretty little story from its initial stage up to the very point at which it had then gone. It was painfully obvious it did not please her father. He listened with frowning brow and stern countenance, and reproached his daughter with having been indiscreet, whereupon she exclaimed—

“But you don’t suppose that I am going to lead the life of a recluse, and never open my lips to a man unless it be yourself?”

“No,” he said sharply, “I don’t suppose anything of the kind. But I maintain that you have no right to form an acquaintance with a young man without first taking steps to ascertain that he is honourable and of good report. And in order to do that your father is certainly the proper person to appeal to. In this instance I shall, beyond doubt, go to the root of the matter; for I have too much regard for you, and too much respect for my own good name, to

remain silent and indifferent where your happiness is concerned. For aught I know or you know, this fellow may be an unprincipled adventurer."

Hester winced a little, for she did not like to hear it suggested that the man she admired above all others might possibly be what is usually termed "an adventurer," meaning in plain words a scoundrel who sticks at nothing to further his own ends. And yet she displayed no feeling, but quietly remarked—

"You forget, father, that an officer and a gentleman are inseparable terms."

"In theory, yes. But in practice it is not so, for many an army and navy officer is an unmitigated blackguard. However, I make no reflections on Hallett, because I know nothing about him at present. We will renew the subject later on, however."

Mr. Dellaby was a persistent man, and having resolved to do a thing, it took a good deal to turn him from it. So the first thing he did was to wait on young Hallett

at his quarters in the Castle, and demand from him what his intentions were ; having been assured that they were honourable, and based on a hope that the young fellow might be found acceptable in the young lady's sight, and the sight of those who had her welfare at heart, he next requested to be referred to Hallett's family, a request that was very promptly complied with.

So far as all this went Mr. Dellaby could find no flaw. The Halletts, as he proved, were people of high standing, and something more than merely respectable. But in the story of Jack's college career there was a black page. While at Oxford he had given way to extravagance and recklessness that had plunged him into serious difficulties, and his mother was unable to discharge his liabilities, but a scandal was avoided by an uncle coming forward and doing so. This was not all, however, for the young man had had an intrigue with a girl, the daughter of a farmer, and had, so it was averred, promised her marriage. Into the merits

or demerits of this matter it is not in the least necessary to enter here. It may be mentioned in passing that it was the means of prematurely, to some extent, closing the young man's college career, and his friends had to pay over to the girl's friends a very liberal sum of money to hush the affair up.

Armed with these facts Mr. Dellaby returned home, not altogether sorry, perhaps, that he had found a weak spot in Jack's armour, for the fact could not be disguised that he had felt annoyed, and very much annoyed indeed, that Hester had dared to form such an acquaintance without first taking him into her confidence and asking his advice. In dealing with the Oxford incident he was not in the least disposed to make any allowance for the proverbial weakness of human nature, nor did he care to consider how highly probable it was that if the incidents in the youth of any eminent man one might like to single out were inquired into, no man would come out

unsullied. Youth, it has been said, is the time of folly, and wisdom comes with whitening hair. But Mr. Dellaby was strongly prejudiced, and, quite disposed to view the affair through a magnifying-glass, he clearly proved this when he again discussed the subject with his daughter after he had exhausted his inquiries, for he said to her—

“I don’t want to be unkind or unduly severe,” showing thereby that he was not speaking strictly in accordance with that high regard for unswerving accuracy which he claimed to have. But men often err from lack of judgment, and it is charitable to suppose that Mr. Dellaby did so in this instance.

“There can be no question in my mind,” he went on, “that Hallett is a blackguard.” When he saw how Hester was stung by this all too severe condemnation he qualified it by saying—“Well, what I mean is, he is a man of little principle, one who is not likely

to have much respect for any woman's feelings. Under these circumstances I shall resolutely decline to recognize him, and I hereby give you strict injunctions to at once sever the connection. Let there be no mistake as to my meaning. You must treat him as if he were an absolute stranger. Do you understand?"

Poor Hester tacitly admitted that she understood only too well. And while not prepared just then to set herself in direct opposition to her father's wishes, she certainly did not intend to accept his dictum as irrevocable.

To what an extraordinary concatenation of thrilling events this difference of opinion between herself and her father was to lead will be disclosed as the narrative proceeds; but Mr. Dellaby himself had no foreshadowing of what was to come. He considered his word law, his commands final, and in order to give, as he thought, the final blow to the whole affair, he penned the following severe letter to young Hallett—

“Sir,—As my daughter’s happiness is more precious to me than aught else in this world, I am naturally anxious that she should do nothing calculated in any way to jeopardize that happiness. I must therefore request—nay, demand in the most emphatic manner, that from this moment you cease your attentions to her, for I do not regard you as being in any way likely to promote her well-being. In fact, it would be nothing short of a calamity if she were to become your wife, and I, her father, as well as all those who love her, would regard it as a dire infliction if by your insidious arts and wiles she were induced to disobey my wishes. As the receipt of this letter will give you clearly to understand how very objectionable you are in my sight, you surely will not have the audacity to persevere in forcing your unwelcome attentions on my child. I have been very outspoken because I consider that any ambiguity would have been a fatal mistake.

“WILLIAM HENRY DELLABY.”

Mr. Dellaby read this letter over two or three times, and he evidently considered that its strong language was fully justified, for he did not alter a single word, nor soften down an expression. But sealing it up, he dispatched the missive to Hallett at his quarters in the Castle, and having done that he sought an interview with his daughter, as recorded in the opening pages of this story.

CHAPTER III.

AT CROSS PURPOSES.

“JACK” HALLETT was still a very young man, not more than four or five and twenty. He was a lieutenant stationed with his regiment, then quartered in Edinburgh Castle. He represented a long line of ancestors, who had honourably and loyally served their country either in the navy or the army. His father had been an admiral and had greatly distinguished himself during the Crimean War for conspicuous bravery and devotion, but during the bombardment of Sebastopol was mortally wounded at the post of duty by a bursting shell. John was his youngest son, and having elected to enter the army in preference to the navy,

he had been well educated, and launched upon his career with the prayers and good wishes of his loving sisters and widowed mother.

The lad had the misfortune—the word is used advisedly—to be singularly handsome. He really seemed to embody all the physical attributes which go to make up a perfect man, while face and feature were full of the pride of goodly stock and high heritage. It was a patrician face, with clear, frank, blue eyes, and a delicate chiselled nose; a mobile face, that in certain moods told of the true soldierly nature, a nature, stern, determined, defiant, unyielding, and full of courage and fire. He who would have set Jack Hallett down as merely a pretty boy would have made a woeful mistake. He had the vivacity of the boy, the laughter of the boy, the joyousness of the boy. But let the occasion arise for the manhood to display itself, and then—what a change! This can best be exemplified by the following little incident in his career. He was barely twenty, when

one day as he was strolling along the high-road near his home, he was suddenly startled by a roar of voices, and looking back beheld a sight that might have turned an older head than his. A magnificent pair of horses attached to a brougham had taken fright, and were thundering on towards him utterly uncontrolled, for the coachman, as was subsequently proved, had been seized with apoplexy, and pitching forward on the backs of the animals had startled them into madness; and on they flew to the certain destruction of themselves, the carriage, and its occupants; for, a couple of hundred yards or so ahead, the road bent at an acute angle, and at that angle was a deep stone quarry into which the frenzied horses must necessarily dash. Hallett took in the situation at a glance, and never a muscle quivered, never a nerve quailed. It seemed as if he was doomed to certain death if he dared to oppose himself to those maddened steeds, and the swaying and jolting vehicle that flew along the road and shook the solid

earth. But no fear of death was there ; no thought of self disturbed him. He placed himself at the side of the road, he breathed hard, his lips were tightly set. As the panting beasts neared him he sprang at their heads, caught the bridles, was carried along for some distance, until he managed to regain his feet, and by sheer strength stopped the runaways on the very brink of the quarry. But for this act of heroism—for it was heroism—the elderly gentleman and his daughter would have been dashed to pieces. As the people who had been following in hot pursuit came up they lustily cheered the young man, but he only remained long enough to assure himself that the young lady and her father were safe, then in the excitement and confusion he slipped away, and it was not until some time afterwards that the old gentleman knew to whom he owed the lives of himself and child. Then he had the stupidity to send young Hallett a money present of a hundred pounds, which was returned with

scorn and indignation and a wrathful message that he was not a hireling, to want payment for doing that which any man worthy the name would have done.

The foregoing details will bring into prominence a good deal of Jack's disposition and character. Proud he was with the pride of independence ; and brave he was with the courage and instinct of the true soldier ; and reckless he was with all the recklessness of youth. Gloominess formed no part of his composition. He revelled in life, and he had no sympathy with those who groan and sigh and moan because things are not quite in accordance with their own views. He believed that the world had been made beautiful that man might enjoy it, and, imbued with the tincture of Bohemianism, he had hitherto followed on the lines of "Hail, fellow, well met," and "A fig for to-morrow." By his comrades and messmates he was regarded as a "jolly good sort," and his attractive manners, his *bonhomie*, his cheerful spirits, and his handsome person

and beaming face made him an especial favourite with the fair sex.

On the first blush it almost seemed as if no more fitting couple could have been mated than Jack and Hester. She, on her part, possessed sufficient seriousness to counteract what might have been termed the levity of his nature. Perhaps "levity" is hardly the correct word to use, for after all it was nothing more terrible than the levity of lusty, joyous, good-looking youth. And whether boy or maid, such a youth can hardly be expected to wear the countenance of a philosopher, nor the gloomy brow of an ascetic, who seems to think it is his mission to go through the world groaning and smiting his breast for the sins of his fellows. From what has now been said of these young people it is not difficult to understand how the acquaintance between them once begun ripened. Opportunities were made for meetings. Hester had found out that at or near a certain hour of the day she had business to transact in Princes

Street—the fashionable promenade ; some tradesmen to call upon, or some trifle to buy which only could be bought in that famous and most beautiful thoroughfare, with its picturesque gardens and grim fortress on the one hand, and its row of stately buildings on the other. And by a remarkable coincidence the young lieutenant had come to consider it necessary to be passing along the street at the same hour, and the inevitable result was a meeting between the two. Then there were mutual expressions of admirably feigned surprise, a hearty handshaking, rippling laughter, and pleasant chat, until the parting came again. And Hester would wander to her home with a growing feeling that the handsome, dashing young soldier was exercising an irresistible influence over her, and she yearned for the next meeting.

Up to this point the girl had kept her feelings secret. Herein perhaps she was prudent, for at the most there had been nothing more serious between her and Jack

than a mild and innocent flirtation ; and it would have argued singularly bad taste on her part had she tacitly or otherwise led any one to suppose that the young officer had an eye to matrimonial potentialities in displaying a preference for her company. So she held her peace, she preserved her secrets, she dreamed her dreams, and when the busybodies and the tattlers and the prying little minds exclaimed—" Oh, I saw you yesterday again in Princes Street with that handsome young fellow, who seems so vain about his beautiful, even, white teeth that he is always showing them," she would answer quietly and ironically—

" Did you ? "

And when the point-blank question was put—" I say, Hester, is there anything serious between you and that fellow ? " her answer was no less quiet and dignified, and would run somewhat as follows—

" Surely I have a right to speak to a gentleman to whom I have been introduced under the roof of a friend's house without

its being thought that I am about to rush into matrimony."

When Hester heard from her father what he had to tell about young Hallett, her feelings were not quite what the narrator expected they would be. To her there was nothing very dreadful in it. For a youngster in his salad days to protest by all the stars in heaven that he was madly in love with the first silly girl who chose to listen to him was no new phase of the human story. It had been repeated almost every day since time began.

Hester had the good sense to understand that a young man could not be gauged and controlled by the same fixed standard by which a girl's conduct is judged. A greater freedom and a greater licence are allowed to the man, and it has ever been so since man walked the earth, and right it is that it should be so. Of course, the shrieking sisterhood, who talk so glibly of "woman's rights," will protest against this doctrine, but, happily, they are in a very insignificant

minority, and the generality of the fair sex, who prefer to remain women, will make no murmur. At any rate, Hester Dellaby, rightly or wrongly, regarded her lover's faults as venial ones. The blackness her father saw she could not see. The impression Jack had made upon her heart was far too deep to be removed easily. To her he had always been the most chivalric, courteous, considerate gentleman, and she could not possibly view him through any medium that was calculated to distort him to her view, and deprive him of that glamour which now surrounded him as she looked at him from her standpoint. Notwithstanding all this, she could not help but feel some concern that her father should display so strong a prejudice, and show no hesitation in referring to her lover as "an adventurer" and "a blackguard." Those were strong terms indeed to use, and as serious as they were strong, and unless a man is prepared to justify them to the hilt he should not breathe them, lest he bring himself into

grave trouble, or wrongly blast the good name and reputation of him against whom he speaks. Hester knew her father too well to suppose that he would easily yield in his prejudice, for as long as he believed himself right nothing would change him. Under these circumstances the poor girl considered that the best course—even if it were not a duty—was to take counsel of her mother, and so to her mother she went.

CHAPTER IV.

A VIOLENT SCENE.

BUT in determining to lay the matter before her mother, Hester was not altogether hopeful that she would get that lady's full sympathy.

To use a common, but at the same time an expressive phrase, for it conveys a great deal of meaning, Mrs. Dellaby had no mind of her own. That is to say, she preferred to be swayed by others, rather than make any attempt to sway. She was a quiet, unostentatious little woman, who was content to live a humdrum life and follow blindly the lead of her husband. She had unbounded faith in him. He was truly her "lord and master," and so highly did she

estimate his cleverness and ability, that she would have deemed it something only a little worse than treason on her part to have called his decisions into question.

Although Hester was fully aware that her parents lived in perfect unity, it did not seem to her possible that in this case her mother would refuse altogether to exercise some independent judgment. For, after all, it was purely a woman's question. At any rate the sentimental part of it was; for when a young woman falls in love with a young man sentiment runs high. It is no use asking her to be practical, no use asking her to sit down and coolly and deliberately go into certain calculations as if she were trying to solve a Euclid problem. Love takes the reason prisoner, and fetters it so that it has no power, and it is the merest fatuity to ask a girl to see through the same spectacles as her grandmother, or to understand the sermons of her elders when they dolefully tell her they have dreamed their dreams, and awakened to

find that this world's idols are very common clay indeed. Youth is a sweet dream, and God grant it may be ever so.

Mrs. Dellaby listened patiently enough to what her distressed daughter had to tell, and then she admonished her to fall in with her father's views. This admonition was conveyed in a mild sort of didactic sermon, in which the duty of children to parents was lightly touched upon, and there were some vague hints thrown out as to the possible punishment that might hereafter result as a penalty for failing to strictly observe that duty.

The girl could hardly be blamed for her want of appreciation of the sentiment which her mother expressed. She had asked for bread and been given a stone; and the very source from whence she had hoped to draw consolation proving barren of sympathy, she found herself forced to act upon her own responsibility.

Under these circumstances she resolved, come what might, and let the consequences

be what they would, to write to Hallett, and then be guided by what he might do and say. Although she had not seen him nor heard from him since her father had sent that very violent letter—a copy of which he had subsequently read to her—which was destined to be productive of so much suffering, she did not believe for a single moment that he had abandoned her. Indeed, she pictured him bowed down with grief and crushed with despair. Nor was she altogether far wrong. Whatever his weaknesses were, and whatever his faults had been, he regarded her with a regard such as he had never had for any other woman; and if any one existed who could influence him to do great things and perform deeds which would add glory to his name, that person was Hester Dellaby.

The receipt of the very trenchant letter from Mr. Dellaby irritated Jack Hallett considerably, for it wounded his pride and insulted his dignity. He could not conceive what he had done to justify such a course

as that which Mr. Dellaby had adopted, and his first thought was to send the letter back with an indignant reply; but his better sense prevailed, and he decided to await the tide of events, as he did not think it possible that Hester would allow herself to be influenced by her father's prejudices.

When he received her letter, therefore, which was very short, and suggested as the more practical course that an appointment to meet should be made, as they could discuss the situation so much better *viva voce* than by correspondence, his spirits rose, and he hastened to respond, saying that he could meet her that very evening, and he named a rendezvous where many a tryst had been kept before, and many a love-tale told.

When the first warm greetings had passed she asked—

“Have you ever done anything, Jack, to justify the course my father has taken?”

“No, emphatically no,” he exclaimed.

“Foolish I have been, and——”

“Stay,” she said, interrupting him. “It is enough for me to have your emphatic assurance that the letter he has sent you is unmerited. I want no confession of all your peccadillos, your escapades, your shortcomings. I am not so foolish as to expect to find a saint in the incarnate garb of a man. To me you have no faults now that I can see. But remember, sir, I look with love’s eyes, and love is ever blind. Further, I would impress upon you that you have inspired me with a great passion that cannot be cooled down nor quenched by the mere bidding of a despotic father. That may be strong language for a daughter to use, but I must put my feelings into words, since I cannot dissemble nor play the hypocrite. And forget not, Jack, that your honour is at stake——”

“And that honour has never yet been stained,” he cried, with an expression of sincerity that could hardly have been assumed.

“I am glad to hear you make that declaration,” she replied.

“And let me assure you, Hester,” he added, “it never shall be stained. I am a soldier, and come of a race of soldiers who have ever placed honour above mere worldly gain. Your love for me is a very precious thing, and I should be worse than a scoundrel if I trifled with it.”

“You would, indeed,” she murmured, with a sigh.

“But you do not think me capable of doing so, do you?”

“No, dearest, no, I do not,” she exclaimed, with great fervency, as she tightened the pressure of her gloved hands about his arm, for they were walking arm-in-arm, and sauntering slowly and listlessly, as is the wont of lovers, towards the path that winds upwards to the summit of Arthur’s Seat.

“And you will trust me, Hester?”

“Aye, with my life; with the essence of my life, my woman’s heart.”

“And may God forget me if ever I betray the trust. That trust shall keep me

straight. It shall be my beacon star, and whatever my fate may be, wherever I may wander, I will not be unmindful of what I owe to you first, and through you to myself."

It was a pretty little speech, and full of lovers' vows as lovers have made them since love began ; and such vows have again and again and still again been broken. But he spoke sincerely enough then, and she, being a woman, reposed her confidence in him. How could she do otherwise? Youth is trustful ; and love sees not.

It was the pleasant time of twilight as Hester Dellaby and Jack Hallett, with linked arms, and heads inclined towards each other, walked on the upward path that leads to the brow of the grey old hill which has witnessed so much that is stirring and strange in the world's story. But they had no eyes for anything but themselves ; no ears for aught but their own voices. Therefore were they all unconscious of the approach of a man who came after them with

rapid strides, and whose every movement seemed suggestive of seething anger. And presently, when he overtook them, he made it instantly manifest that fierce wrath burned within him, for, though he was breathless with his uphill tramp, he exclaimed, addressing Hallett—

“You dastardly scoundrel!”

The speaker was Mr. Dellaby, who, having discovered his daughter's absence within a few minutes of her leaving the house, suspected that she had gone out to keep a tryst. So off he set in pursuit, for he had found in her room on a table Hallett's brief note, which she had carelessly left lying there. The young couple were necessarily disconcerted by this unexpected apparition, but the girl so far retained her presence of mind as to reprove her father for the strong language he used. This only served to exasperate him still more, and he said with all the rancour of a desperately angered man—

“Do not dictate to me. It is true you

are my child, but I blush for you. I am ashamed of you. As for you, sir"—facing the young officer—"I feel that language is not strong enough to give expression to my disgust for you and contempt for you. You are a coward—a blackguard."

"I must take exception, sir, to both those terms," answered Hallett proudly.

"You may take exception to what you like," retorted the irate father. "I repeat that you are a blackguard; for in spite of my letter, in spite of my warning, you have had the temerity, and been deceitful enough to write to this silly girl, and to tempt her from the path of truth and duty to her parents, in order that you may corrupt her with your honied words and your shameless lying flattery."

"I resent this base accusation," replied Jack, growing very red in the face by reason of the great effort he made to suppress his anger.

"Resent that if you are a man," hissed Mr. Dellaby, as, entirely carried away by

his feelings, he raised a walking-stick he had in his hand, and struck the young man across the forehead.

“Father, father, shame on you,” cried Hester in an agony of distress, as she flung herself between the two men. But in this trying moment Jack displayed the coolness and self-possession of a true soldier, and he said dispassionately to her—

“Do not concern yourself, Hester, I shall not retaliate, but another man does not live whom I would allow to deal me such a blow with impunity. This man, however, is your father, so I accept the insult, and am content to let time bring its own revenge; and time will revenge me, of that I am sure. Good-night, Hester, and do not forget me; your father will escort you safely home.”

He turned and walked away, and there was a touch of absolute grandeur in his dignified manner, and the absence of wrath under such trying circumstances.

Then, with a bitter cry, Hester covered her face with her hands and wept audibly.

"You ought to be ashamed of those tears," said her father, none of his anger abated.

"Yes, you are right," she replied warmly, as she wiped them away with her handkerchief. "They are a sign of weakness, and I ought to be strong. I will weep no more ; but let me tell you this, that your mad conduct to-night fills me with a sense of burning shame, and if you think that that is the way to beget my obedience or retain my affection you will find yourself woefully mistaken."

"You shall either render me the homage a father, who has the true interests of his daughter at heart, has a right to expect from her, or you can go your ways as an outcast and a wanton, and I will tear you out of my heart, and never mention your name except it is to curse you."

Poor Hester thrilled with a little shudder at his violent language, but she had the sound sense to make no response, as no good could come of a prolongation of the argu-

ment. So she walked home in silence, and he followed, and she felt like one feels who has suddenly and rudely been awakened from a rapturous dream to find that the world is full of moaning.

CHAPTER V.

MRS. DELLABY'S TRIUMPH.

IT is difficult to imagine a more unfortunate position for a young woman of high-toned principles and conscientious scruples to be placed in than that of suddenly finding herself compelled to stifle down the natural feelings of the heart on the one hand, or to set herself in direct opposition to the expressed wishes of her parents on the other. It certainly was a position calculated to affect Hester Dellaby very deeply. For many days she endured a mental struggle which depressed her to an unusual degree. She had always been a loving, a dutiful daughter, but not even her filial love nor her sense of duty could blind her

to the manifest injustice of her father's behaviour. She herself blushed with a conscious sense of shame, for no woman likes to be humiliated in the sight of the man who holds her heart, and certainly she had been humiliated that night as she had never been before.

When they reached the house her father said, with none of his habitual peremptoriness abated—

“I have something more to say to you, and you had better come to me in the library in half-an-hour.”

Now arose within his daughter the spirit of strength and self-will which he himself had given her, and, with but an ill-suppressed defiance in her tone, she made answer—

“No, sir” (the *sir* somewhat galled him); “no, sir, I shall do nothing of the kind. You can hardly expect me to be so utterly subdued, so meekly submissive, as to keep calm while you ruthlessly and rudely probe and re-probe a fresh and bleeding wound. I

resolutely decline to hold further converse to-night on the subject."

She gave him no time to reply, but, leaving him looking almost dazed with astonishment, went to her room.

Now, there was no wonder Mr. Dellaby was astonished, for this mutinous spirit, as he was pleased to consider it, took him quite by surprise. In the egotism of his own esteem, and the blind belief in his own infallibility as a ruler of his household, he considered that his lightest command ought to beget silent and immediate obedience, while his judgment should be beyond question.

This doctrine was due no doubt to his Indian experience. When he first went out to our enormous empire in the East, the servants of the great "John Company" were very apt to develop the overbearing and masterful tone which at one time was considered necessary to the complete subjection of the varied races the Company ruled. Due allowance and some excuse should be made for this, as the positions in

which the Company's servants were often placed were well calculated to make them autocrats. They as frequently as not carried their lives in their hands, and for their own safety, and the safety of all concerned, they had to exact implicit obedience from large numbers of natives. A man often found himself in some wild district far removed from help or succour if they should be suddenly needed, and in the welfare of his employers, if for no other reason, he was compelled to be determined, resolute, and to make an autocratic and even despotic display of power, for in those days India was truly held by the few against the many, and the slightest show of weakness would have been fatal to the tremendous interests that were bound up in the Company.

This may all seem like an apology for Mr. Dellaby's conduct, and frankly it is to some extent advanced as such, for, after all, it was his head that was wrong, and not his heart. Wrong he was in principle, no doubt, but he erred conscientiously—that

is, he did not believe he was erring at all, therefore was he conscientious. He could not but help feeling some concern at the self-will which had suddenly displayed itself in his daughter. He knew, and he was proud to think that it was so, that she was by no means lacking in character or individuality ; but he made the lamentable mistake of regarding her as a child, and, though a child might be obstinate and self-willed, it was imperative on the part of its natural guardian to subdue the obstinacy and curb the will. Although Mr. Dellaby never dreamed of allowing himself to be swayed by his wife, he liked to discuss matters with her, and take counsel with her, though it was always as one who asks a friend for advice, but who has fully made up his mind beforehand not to accept that advice, however sound it may be.

It is a contradictory and inconsistent trait of character, but one that is pretty common ; undoubtedly it was strongly marked in Mr. Dellaby. So he went to

his wife, and she was alarmed by the obvious signs which told her that he had been greatly upset, and was exceedingly distressed. With great circumstantiality he narrated to her all that had occurred, and when it came to the incident of the beating—in other words, the assault upon young Hallett—she looked up suddenly from her work, for she was embroidering a stool cover, and said plaintively—

“You don’t mean to say, William, that you struck him?”

There must also have been a touch of reproof in her tone, or at any rate he thought so, for he responded sharply—

“Yes, of course I did. I felt it necessary to teach the impudent young beggar a lesson, and I am only sorry that I was not more severe.”

Mrs. Dellaby subsided within herself again, and was silent.

“Now, I don’t care a pin’s point,” he continued, “what Hallett may think. He was leading the child into the paths of

disobedience, and he had to be sent to the right-about. But I am concerned for Hester. When once a girl gets all sorts of absurd notions about love and that kind of thing into her head, she can no longer be reasoned with in the ordinary way. Therefore, like all unreasonable beings, she must be treated without any regard for her feelings."

"Not quite, dear," very mildly put in his submissive wife, with a sidelong and timid glance at him, as though she was afraid of the effect her words were calculated to produce.

"I say yes," he cried, with a gesture of impatience, as though he couldn't brook her interruptions. "I repeat, that her feelings under such circumstances as these cannot be taken into account. A father who is really desirous of studying his child's welfare must be cruel only to be kind. Hester is wilful, and after all she is but a child. Why, it is only a day or two ago, so to speak, that I was dangling her on my knee."

Once more did Mrs. Dellaby look up from her work, and, in the deferential and subdued manner so characteristic of her, she showed that she was not in entire accord with him, for she remarked—

“I think, William dear, that we ought not to regard her altogether as a child. Remember that many a young woman at twenty is not only a wife but a mother.”

“And shameful it is that it should be so,” was her husband’s rejoinder. “The idea of a girl of twenty taking upon herself the responsibility of matron and mother. It is monstrous, upon my word it is, for half the misery in the world is due to youthful marriages. Boys and girls come together and marry before they are capable of realizing the responsibilities of life. And what is the result when the false glamour of courtship and honeymoon has worn off?—all the defects in each other’s characters and persons become visible, while the sordid and unromantic side of life is revealed.

Then commences the misery, and out of misery cometh sin."

Poor little Mrs. Dellaby sheepily and feebly muttered—

"I fear you are right."

When her husband preached, she listened and bowed to him as one might bow to an oracle.

"Right! of course I am right!" he answered, with his assertive egotism made painfully manifest. "Well, now, do you expect me to be a party to Hester's moral suicide?"

"Certainly not."

"Very well, then, why talk as though you thought I was doing something entirely wrong?"

"Oh, William," pleaded the submissive little woman, "how can you say that! You know what faith I have in your judgment; nor can I believe for an instant that you would stand in the way of anything you honestly thought would promote our dear girl's welfare."

"God forbid that I should!" he exclaimed with the emphasis of sincerity. "I would willingly sacrifice myself rather than throw a cloud over her life; but I am convinced Hallett is not the man for her. I believe him to be utterly without principle."

"Are you sure, dear, that that is so?" queried his wife with a frightened look; for though she had just expressed faith in his judgment, she could not altogether subdue her womanly nature, nor kill the motherly sympathy she felt for her daughter.

"Sure! I am as sure as a man can be sure of anything. I have learnt enough of his history to feel perfectly justified in my assertion. I say he is unprincipled. I say he is a vagabond in the worst sense of the word; therefore Hester will never have my consent to her union with him. Besides, why should the girl want to marry a soldier? The best of them are bad—that's been my experience; and, apart from that, there is always the probability of her being early left a widow. My own idea is that

neither soldiers nor sailors should be allowed to marry."

"I am afraid, William," remarked his wife, with an attempt at a laugh, as though she wished him to suppose she was perpetrating a small joke,—“I am afraid, William, you would find that the majority of young women would be against you on that point."

"The majority of young women are fools," he answered irascibly; whereupon she gathered that she had made a mistake, and that it would be better to keep silent, having regard to his mood. She knew too well that his self-assertiveness, his unbending will—pig-headedness some people might have called it—his unyielding prejudices, and his obduracy, when he believed himself in the right and other people in the wrong, made it very difficult to reason with him. At any rate, she was sufficiently conscious of her own weakness to refrain from making the attempt. But notwithstanding this, and notwithstanding her blind faith in him,

she could not subdue certain misgivings that disturbed the rhythm of her own heart with regard to her daughter; for she knew that Hester had inherited a good deal of her father's strong will, and if in this juncture of affairs the girl should refuse to obey, it might be provocative of disastrous consequences. With that obsequious deference therefore that she always displayed towards her husband, Mrs. Dellaby ventured to suggest the advisability of dealing with Hester in a diplomatic rather than a commanding spirit, and it was soon made clear to her that this stern and despotic man was not without an underlying fear of the potential evils of any too high-handed course with his daughter. For, while it was very easy to speak of her in theory as a child, it might be found in practice that she was capable of displaying the will of a determined woman. Anyway, he more than hinted to his wife that she should see what her motherly influence could effect in

the way of inducing the girl to renounce Hallett; and thus it came about that shortly afterwards mother and daughter were together, and the mother, by such argument as came within her power, was endeavouring to convince Hester that disobedience, and opposition to the wishes of parents, were heinous sins on the part of a child.

Hester was quite willing to concede that point when the wishes were just, but she maintained that there were times when a parent's wishes could be legitimately opposed on the grounds that they were inconsistent with common-sense, or not based upon a fair and impartial consideration of the merits of the case. Further, she fearlessly asserted that in this instance her cause was a just one, and that her father had behaved with a violence which was little short of brutal. She was indignant and wrathful, as well she might be. Firstly, because her father had shown

so little regard for her feelings; and, secondly, because his insult to Lieutenant Hallett was rather what might have been expected from an ignorant and ill-bred person than from one who laid claim to be considered a gentleman.

"It cannot be supposed," she said to her mother, "that I am going to dis sever myself from Hallett simply because my father has taken a violent and unreasoning prejudice against him."

"But Hallett's career is well calculated to beget prejudice," answered her mother.

"Nothing in his career that my father has told me of warrants prejudice on my part. Besides, I have Jack's solemn assurance that his honour is unstained."

Mrs. Dellaby would not have been a woman if she had failed to appreciate at its full value such an expression of feeling on the part of a girl for her lover as this. It showed that Hester was not to be coerced against her will, and the motherly

heart was disturbed with an anxiety that she found it by no means easy to conceal. But she was conscious also that the situation could only be saved by her, as neither heated language nor a display of will would avail aught, for the one would only irritate, and will would beget will. So she rose, or rather tried to rise, equal to the occasion, and her efforts were crowned with a certain measure of success.

Hester was not lacking in a proper sense of respect for, nor in loyalty and devotion to, her parents, and, therefore, when her mother pointed out that a little concession on both sides in this instance could hardly fail to conduce to a much better understanding than rashness at a time when tempers were ruffled and relations strained, she lent an attentive ear.

Mrs. Dellaby could not by any stretch of the imagination be described as a woman of any individuality. The reader will have gathered this from such analysis as has

already been made of the lady's character. And it has further been pointed out that she really, if ever, attempted to call her husband's motives or his conduct seriously into question. She had, however, that intuitive power of arriving at a conclusion without reasoning which is a much more feminine than masculine characteristic. For while the man reasons by a process of deduction, a woman goes straight to the point, owing to some instinct—for the want of a better name—which is peculiar to her. In this instance the lady saw that her daughter might be led, but could not be driven, and so all the motherly influence was brought to bear to induce the girl to wait for a little while before attempting to renew her acquaintance with Lieutenant Hallett. Mrs. Dellaby emphasized the argument that time is a great assuager of wrath as it is of grief, and, given a little time, the father's views might *possibly*—she used the word “possibly”—might

possibly change, and the course of true love be allowed to flow smoothly. Hester was so far impressed that she consented to her mother's suggestion that she should go away for a time—go to some relatives who were temporarily sojourning at a country residence not far removed from Flodden's classic ground. The distance from Edinburgh was not great, but the good lady considered it sufficient to separate the lovers. She urged, however, as the influencing consideration, that Mr. Dellaby would have time to cool down and think differently. Moreover, as it was utterly impracticable just then that Lieutenant Hallett and Hester could marry, persistency in open courtship could not fail to keep the wound already made open, and be productive of misery and pain. Whereas a period of quiescence would probably bring about in the end what the young people desired.

“This,” pursued the lady, who, of course,

held a brief for her husband, "will be infinitely better than open rupture with your father. You know how determined he is in the face of opposition, and it really would be a terrible thing if you and he were to be at constant strife. I do hope, therefore, that you will fall in with my views; and if you will give me your solemn promise that you will not communicate with Hallett, nor attempt to see him, for three months, I will use such influence as I may possess with your father on your behalf. Now, I certainly think this is a very reasonable suggestion, and you may depend upon it that if you are destined to become Hallett's wife, nothing can keep you apart, but it is far better to exercise patience than oppose your father's wishes, and henceforth live your life with a dark shadow over it."

Mrs. Dellaby certainly argued sincerely, if she did not argue well; Hester was influenced, and she gave the required promise of three months' silence. Very reluctantly

she gave it, it is true ; but she preferred peace to war, and three months might be the means of changing her father's views. So in the course of a few days she departed for the south, and Mrs. Dellaby felt that she had scored a triumph.

CHAPTER VI.

JACK'S RESOLVE.

IN falling in with her mother's suggestion poor Hester had in a sense failed to consider Lieutenant Hallett as a factor in the calculation. It was indeed very much like reckoning without the host, and the most momentous results were destined to follow the oversight. If the girl had seen Hallett, or written to him to explain, all would have been well probably, but, true to her promise, she did neither the one nor the other, and the consequence was, Jack fretted and chafed under his disappointment. He was a proud, high-spirited boy, and the shameful insult he had been subjected to at the hands of

the irate Dellaby had wounded his pride terribly. Nothing could have testified in a more emphatic way to his love and high regard for Hester, than his meekness under the unwarranted chastisement. But for love's sweet sake what will man not dare and do! Therefore Hallett bore with his wounded pride, because, remembering Hester's words on the night of the outrage—for outrage undoubtedly it was—he felt sure that she would write to him or see him.

So day after day he haunted the place where he had been wont to meet her, and anxiously he looked to each post as it came in, expecting it would bring him the missive that would be as balm to his hurt feelings. But he met her not, neither did the hoped-for letter come, and then, as was but natural, he began to think that her words and promises were nothing more than the froth of an ebullient emotion which had suddenly cooled. He would have been a spiritless youth indeed if he had not taken this to

heart. Perhaps if he had loved her less he would have scorned her more, but his love was a very real thing, and no words that could be used would do full justice to the stinging nature of the disappointment, and the crushed pride under which he laboured. And when by chance he learned from a lady, a mutual acquaintance who knew Hester, that the girl had been sent away from home, and was then sojourning with relatives in the Border country, it seemed that he had been befooled, that so long as it was a summer sky she was content to walk with him, and to talk with him, but with the first blast of an adverse breeze she had shrunk away, allowing her promises to wither like flowers that are plucked. Think as he would, and argue as he would with himself, he could find no excuse for her silence.

“If she had really cared for me,” he mentally exclaimed, “nothing in the world would have prevented her writing to me, if it had only been one word to bid me hope.

But women are all alike. They speak words only, and a man who places his faith in them is a fool. Like butterflies, women revel in sunshine and flowers, but when the first wintry blast blows they are seen no more."

This was terribly severe, and no less severe than unjust. But full allowance must be made for him. He was young. Of the practical side of life he knew little, and he judged woman under the influence of a bitter disappointment and a great wrong. In the dark and stirring future, however, that lay before him, he was yet to learn that woman's devotion, her self-abnegation, her silent heroism, her tireless patience, her magnificent tenderness are shown best in the hour of trial, sorrow, affliction, suffering, and death. Hester Dellaby had been to him a star that had made his world the brighter for its shining, and in a moment of emotional sentiment, of boyish gush, he had once penned the following lines to her—

I want no star in heaven to guide me,
I want no moon, no sun to shine,
While I have you, sweetheart, beside me,
While I am sure that you are mine.

But with a cruel suddenness the star had disappeared from his narrowed firmament, and he was like one who groped in darkness—the flowers and the beauty of the earth were obscured.

“She has mistaken me for a carpet soldier,” he murmured bitterly; “but some day she will know better.”

It often seems in our human story as if it was specially ordained that certain men and women should be subjected to crosses and disappointments, in order that the higher and better qualities of their natures may be developed. Many a man who has displayed magnificent heroism and made his name ring, would have remained obscure and unknown had some reverse of fortune or some startling circumstance not called forth his energies and noble qualities; and many a woman, around whose memory are

now twined the bays of loving regard, would have died unsung had she not been called upon in the hour of awful need to show how much of the angel there is in the female nature.

Jack Hallett took his disappointment to heart in a way that his most intimate friends would hardly have thought possible, for he had generally been regarded as a lad who was incapable of any great or lasting emotion, and rather disposed to be inconstant if not insincere. But those who thus judged him looked no further than the surface, and saw nothing of the germs of the splendid nature that lay in the depths and only wanted the proper conditions to call them into active life.

It was about this time that one or two regiments which were then stationed at Colchester were under orders to sail for Persia, and one day Jack presented himself to the Colonel of his own regiment—an old warrior who had seen much service, and who, from his having been very intimate

with Jack's father, was much interested in the lad—and to him he thus addressed himself—

“I am very anxious, sir, to have an opportunity to make a name for myself, if that is at all possible——”

The old Colonel laughed gruffly, and said—

“That is a noble ambition, young gentleman, and I applaud you for it. But you must have patience. The opportunity comes sooner or later to every man.”

“Yes, sir, but I want to hurry on my opportunity, and I want you to help me.”

“How? Why? What does this mean?”

“The 20th are under orders for Persia.”

“Yes. I know that.”

“Well, sir, I want to exchange into that regiment; and with your influence and assistance I may be able to manage it. Inactivity here goes against my grain. I want to see service. I should like to smell powder.”

The Colonel looked hard at him for some moments from beneath his shaggy eyebrows,

and then, in the deepest tones he was capable of sinking his voice to, he said—

“What does this mean, boy?”

“It means, sir, that I wish to go away.”

“But why?”

“For the reasons I have stated.”

“But you have another and more potent reason,” replied the Colonel, making a shrewd guess at the truth, no doubt aided by something or other in the young man’s expression.

“I *have* another reason, Colonel.”

“There is a woman in the question?”

“Since you ask me bluntly, I will answer you frankly. Yes.”

“Ah, I thought so. Women are devils. They drive men to destruction. But now, look here, youngster. Don’t you let the best woman in creation turn your head. I admire your desire to distinguish yourself. That is all right. But I am not going to allow you to throw yourself away because some heartless minx has jilted you. Lads of your age see a pretty face, and at once

think they are desperately in love. But it's calf love, that's what it is—calf love, and nothing more. Now go back to your duties, and don't let any silly sentiment disturb your serenity. It's a mistake, take my word for it. Half the women in the world ought to be drowned, and the other half kept chained up, for woman is at the bottom of all mischief."

Jack waited patiently until the old warrior—who, no doubt, had been as much a warrior in love as in war—had blown some of his steam off, and then he answered with quiet dignity—

"You do not quite gauge the situation, Colonel, as far as I am concerned. Nor is it necessary, I presume, that I should enter into minute details. I have no doubt there is a good deal of truth in what you say, and I am quite old enough to understand that a woman is at the bottom of most mischief, but still we should get on badly without women——"

"Oh, yes," broke in the Colonel, "they're

useful sometimes, I admit. They nurse our babies, darn our stockings, put buttons on our shirts, can use a needle without sticking it into their fingers, which a man always does. They look after us when we are ill, and that sort of thing, but damn 'em, they spend our money, and drive us to the devil."

"Possibly, sir; but to come back to the object of my interview with you," pursued Jack, unmindful of the interruption; "pray let me urge my request with greater emphasis. I want to go abroad, and I hope and trust you will not throw any obstacles in my way."

"If you are really serious in this matter," mumbled the Colonel, knitting his ragged brows into a stern expression of thoughtfulness——

"Oh, sir, I am serious enough, I pledge you my honour."

"You really want to go out to Persia?"

"I do."

"Let me see, now. When do the 20th leave?"

"I think it is in about six weeks."

"Ah! well, there's not much time to be lost. Well, now, I will see what I can do. It is very likely the affair can be managed. At any rate I'll put matters in trim, and you can rely upon my doing my best for you; not that I want to lose you, on the contrary. I've watched you closely, and I am convinced you have the makings of a good officer in you. You're a smart lad, and as the son of my esteemed friend I should like you to make your way, and unless I'm mistaken you will." Hallett bowed, and the colour came into his face, but he made no answer. "Now go to your duties, but look here, young fellow, don't you get entangling yourself with wenches. They'll play the very deuce with your career if you do. Women are all very well in their way, and wine is a good thing to drink toasts in; but the man who allows either the one or the other to muddle his brain is an idiot."

"I have no doubt you are right, sir, and

speak from experience," replied Jack, with a sly look and an ill-concealed smile playing about his lips, for it was notorious in the regiment that the Colonel was a perfect lady-killer, and had had entanglements by the score in his time, while as a lover of good liquor he was scarcely to be surpassed. His shaggy eyebrows came together again as he growled sternly—

"No innuendos, young fellow, no innuendos. Go to your duty."

Hallett waited no longer, but saluted and retired ; and when the door had closed upon his retreating figure, the old soldier relaxed his stern expression and murmured to himself—

"That's a fine lad, a fine lad, and he'll make a clever and plucky officer, or else I'm woefully out in my reckoning. However, he shall not lack opportunity if I can help it ; and since he wants to go to Persia he shall go. I suppose the fact is he's lost his heart for the time being to some pretty puss. Well, they will do it. Girls will be girls

and boys boys. God bless them all, say I. If I had my time to come over again, hang me if I wouldn't make love to every pretty girl I could speak to. Love and war are a soldier's trade. But young Hallett has evidently been seriously bitten, and he must go away."

Jack waited as patiently as he could for the result of the interview with his Colonel, until so many days passed that he began to despair and fret again. At last, however, he was ordered to go to the Colonel's quarters, and the old soldier thus addressed him—

"Well, sir, are you still desirous of going away?"

"I am, sir; my desire has not abated one jot."

"Then I have to inform you that the exchange can be managed, and you must start for the south to-morrow."

"I am deeply indebted to you, Colonel, and no less grateful," said Hallett, with very obvious emotion.

“I want no thanks. I only hope you will not regret the step. The regiment you are leaving is a distinguished one, and has carved its name deeply on the tablets of honour. It has a glorious history, and any soldier may well feel proud of belonging to such a regiment.”

“I beg and pray of you, Colonel,” cried Hallett, unable to conceal his feelings, “not to think that I am indifferent to the honour of having belonged to the regiment, whose annals are indeed glorious, and the memory of whose great and heroic deeds can never fade. Fain would I have remained with you ; but the current of our lives does not always run as we desire it to do. I yearn to go abroad ; that yearning will not be suppressed ; and I trust that I may never do an act or deed that will in the slightest degree reflect upon my own honour or the honour of those with whom I may be associated ; nor will I ever forget that an officer and a gentleman are synonymous terms.”

The Colonel extended his hand to his lieutenant, and said with what for him was an unusual display of warmth—

“ You speak bravely and well, and there is a sterling ring in your speech. Old as I am, I may yet live to see you famous, and if I do I shall be proud of this day. God prosper you wherever you go. You will dine with me to-night, and I will invite your brother-officers to meet you and drink your health.”

Hallett could scarcely find words to express his thanks, and his head was all in a whirl as he left the Colonel's presence. Such spare hours as he had during the rest of the day he devoted to writing to his sisters and mother, acquainting them with the step he was taking, and promising them that he would get leave of absence for two or three days to visit them before sailing for Persia. And when he had finished this correspondence he penned a brief note to Hester, of which the following is a copy :—

“ When we last met, and you so solemnly

renewed your pledges to me, I would have strangled that man who dared to assert that you would soon forget your vows. But it is the old story. Woman is as fickle as an April day, and she writes her vows in water. However, I must take my chance in the lottery of life. I hoped to win you, but have lost; and so I go forth into the unknown future, with the prompting of a great recklessness moving me. I want excitement. I want the din of battle; the roar of tumultuous war. My wishes may be gratified, for there is strife going on in Persia, and I am bound for Persia. I only hope the war will not fizzle out before I get there. At any rate in a foreign land I shall find distraction; and when you and I are far from each other my sorrow may become less keen. But forget you I never can. Your name is graven across my heart, and I vow a vow on my honour and by my soul that no other shall replace it. Farewell! and farewell again! When you read this—if ever you do read it—I shall have

started for the East. I have exchanged into the 20th, under orders for Persia, and the regiment embarks in a fortnight. Your portrait which you once gave me I shall retain. I ought to send it back, and intended to do so, but I find it impossible. I cannot let it go from me. It will keep me straight. I intend to have it fitted into a small morocco case, and shall wear it next my heart. That's ridiculous, isn't it? I know I am foolish; but then I have loved you; do love you still. For the last time—Farewell!”

This was a manly letter, and though there was sentiment in it, it was wholesome sentiment. It was the sentiment of youth, and there was naught in it to be ashamed of. He put the letter into an envelope and addressed it to Hester at the house where she was staying, near Flodden; but he did not intend to post it until the very day that he was starting for the East.

That evening he dined with the Colonel and the rest of the officers, and when the

cloth had been removed and the after-dinner wine was circulating, the Colonel requested the company to join him in drinking a toast. Then in a graceful, even eloquent little speech, he bade the young lieutenant God-speed, referring to him in the very kindest way, and he wound up by the following facetious remarks:—

“Gentlemen, our young comrade-in-arms is leaving us, not because he is dissatisfied with us, for I am sure he would give us a good character if we need one, but because he is thirsting to flesh his maiden sword in some benighted Persian. Not that I think the chance to do that will be given him, for I fancy the bobbery will all be over before he gets there. It seems to me only a flash in the pan. But the truth is, and, gentlemen, the truth cannot be disguised, for as murder will out, so will truth—this fledgling has been trying his hand at another game; he has been laying siege to the heart of some pretty girl, but has had to withdraw his forces and beat a retreat. Well, we have

all gone through that experience, I suppose, and a very pleasant pastime it is. It is generally supposed that when a soldier is not fighting he is making love. I shall say nothing now to disturb that fossilized idea, though we cannot always be on the winning side in love no more than we can in war; but a true soldier does not allow himself to be disgracefully defeated either in war or love, and though I know nothing of our young friend's little campaign, I am prepared to stake my reputation he has conducted it manfully and in a soldierly way, and though he has been defeated, he retreats with unsullied honour and his good name unstained. Gentlemen, let us pledge him in a bumper, and wish him the best of luck wherever he goes."

The toast was drunk with enthusiasm, and Hallett sat like one in a dream. The cheers of his comrades seemed to daze him, and the words of his Colonel pierced his brain, until his head was in a whirl, for he had had no idea that reference would be

made to the cause which had led to the step he was taking.

When the clinking of the glasses and the cheers had ended he rose pale and agitated, and only by a supreme effort could he control his voice.

“From the bottom of my heart I thank you,” he said; “and whether my life be long or short, wherever I go, or whatever may be my lot, I shall endeavour to thoroughly deserve Colonel Farquharson’s opinion of me, and I will humbly try to so order my conduct that no man shall be able to honestly say that I have done aught that I need be ashamed of. You may trust me to uphold the honour of our profession, and to strive to add to its glory. That is all I can say, gentlemen, for I am not accustomed to make speeches, and I pray you pardon my shortcomings in that respect.”

He could say no more, but resumed his seat amidst the applause of his brother-officers. The sincerity of his words, the

earnestness with which he spoke, could not be mistaken.

The next day he took his departure, being accompanied to the station by many of his comrades; and a fortnight later, having bade a tender farewell to those who were near and dear to him, he embarked with his regiment at Portsmouth. Just before he sailed he dropped the letter he had written to Hester into the post, and as the night-mail bore that letter north, the gallant troopship that was carrying him and his comrades to the East was ploughing her way down Channel towards the steel-blue ocean.

CHAPTER VII.

LETTERS FROM INDIA.

WHEN Mr. Dellaby heard of the result of his wife's negotiations with Hester, he was, it is needless to say, exceedingly gratified. For though he would have hesitated to confess it, he had begun to feel rather alarmed lest his daughter with an assertion of self-will should persist in keeping up a connection with young Hallett. He was not unmindful of the proverb about taking a horse to the water, and if Hester had shown a disposition to give a practical illustration of the somewhat musty, albeit useful proverb, things might have been awkward. As it was, all was well. At least so it seemed, and he did not care to reflect on

the possibilities of his wandering wilfully blind into a fool's paradise. It was the immediate effect that he concerned himself about, and not what might result at the expiration of the stipulated period to which Hester had pledged herself to refrain from holding any communication with Jack. In three months much might happen, and three months in some cases was long enough for love to wither in a girl's heart. At any rate, so Dellaby thought, and, thinking so, his wonted serenity returned, for the time being, at least. Just about this time there came a bundle of letters from his daughter Margaret, who was with her husband, Lieutenant-Colonel Pritchard, at Meerut, in India. "Madge," as she was always lovingly called in the family, was affected with the *cacoëthes scribendi*, and was an exceedingly diligent correspondent. She scarcely allowed a mail to leave without its carrying communications from her to her family. For though she had a doting husband and two sweet children—a girl and a boy—her

heart was not entirely weaned from the loved ones at home. On this occasion she wrote a letter each to her father and mother, and one to Hester. To her father she wrote amongst other things as follows:—

Her letter was dated Meerut, India, November 1856.

“We are beginning to wake up here after the hot season, which has been unusually hot and unusually trying. For a little while I was not very well, and went off to the hills with Fred and Amy” (her two children), “and they and I are now first-rate. You have heard, no doubt, that there has been some trouble with the native troops at Barrackpore and Dum Dum. A mutinous spirit displayed itself, but was speedily suppressed. It arose, according to common belief, because the native soldiers thought that their cartridges had been greased with pork fat—a most ridiculous idea, of course, but then the native mind is very apt to conceive wrong impressions, as you yourself are no doubt aware. The truth of the

matter is, however, and it is known to those behind the scenes, that the little murmurings of discontent are due to the preachings of certain mendicant priests, who, whether on their own account or as paid emissaries of some of our country's enemies is not quite clear, have been secretly advocating the driving of the British out of India. An old prophecy has been revived to the effect that in 1857 India will be under Mussulman rule. Of course, George" (her husband) "and all the officers here laugh at the bare idea, but I confess that sometimes myself I have misgivings, for it is impossible not to notice that of late the natives are not as submissive as they were. Even one's servants show a greater independence of spirit, and they are not at the trouble they once were to conceal the contempt which we all know they bear for us as their conquerors. I often wish that George and I and the children could return to dear old England, for though my fears may be very foolish and the result of a morbid nervousness, I

never feel quite comfortable here, and it seems almost a sacrilege to me to call it home. However, we have many dear friends. All the officers are exceedingly nice, and everything is done to make life pass pleasantly. It is a terribly long time, however, to look forward to 1859, when George's regiment will have completed its Indian service and return home. He often urges me to visit you with the children, but greatly as I yearn to do that, I confess that I cannot make up my mind to leave him, for if there is danger ahead I will share it with him. The place of a devoted wife is at the side of her husband in the hour of trial. I had a letter from Harry" (her brother) "at Malta the other day. He says it is on the cards that his regiment may be ordered to Bombay. I hope that will be so, as I should then have a chance of seeing him. We do seem such a scattered family somehow. But I would fain believe that all things are ordered for the best."

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In this very womanly letter Mrs. Pritchard showed that she had a prescience which was lacking to those who ought to have been better informed, but who, with a somewhat egotistical consciousness of their own strength and might, refused to believe in any widespread dissatisfaction, but even if it existed they were confident they could cope with it in a very masterful manner.

“Madge’s” letter to her sister was sent under separate cover. It was destined—unconsciously so to the writer—to influence Hester’s future movements in a way that was never anticipated. How this was the case will best be understood by the following extract.

* * * * *

“Often, dear, when my thoughts wander away far across the sea that separates us—and, oh, how many times they do that in the course of a week—I wonder what you are doing, and, oh, how I yearn to have a glimpse of your dear, darling face. How true it is that absence makes the heart grow

fonder ! You are a woman, dear, with a woman's heart, and a woman's mind, and mayhap you have given that heart into somebody's keeping. If so, God grant he may be worthy of the great trust, for you, my beloved sister, have such a sweet disposition, such a generous, noble mind, that the man who wins you may well be proud. Will it be your fate to have a soldier husband ? Likely enough it will, for all our people seem to have an inseparable link with the army ; and though the risks are many, for a soldier's life must ever be a precarious one, a soldier, speaking generally, makes a good husband. Of course there are good and bad among them, but I confess that I am strongly of opinion you are more likely to draw a prize amongst army men than amongst civilians.

“ You will forgive this chatter, dear, won't you ? but it is a woman talking to a woman, a sister to a sister, and you know how anxious I am about you, how interested in your movements, your thoughts, your

hopes. Although it may seem selfish of me to wish it, for our dear father and mother have no one but you at home now to comfort them in their old age, I do wish you would come out to us for a few months, if *pater* and *mater* could manage to part from you for so long a time. You would be so intensely interested in everything here, for new-comers cannot fail to be interested. Everything is so totally different to what it is in our dear old fog-sodden country. Pa would have no difficulty in getting somebody to look after you on the passage out, for we have so many friends constantly going to and fro. You might come as far as Alexandria with Captain Milton in the P. & O. *Poonah*, and you would have plenty of company across the desert and on to Calcutta, where I would meet you, and we would travel up the country together. My dear little tots, at the bare idea of you coming, go into ecstasies. Fred is now seven years old and Amy is five. They are such bonnie children and talk so prettily.

Freddy has made all sorts of plans should it chance that 'Tanty,' as he calls you, comes. But really, Hetty, I think I am indulging in a wild dream, for I cannot imagine either mother or father consenting to your leaving them even for so short a time as a little year. So, heigho! I must fain restrain my impatience for a sight of your dear face until our time here expires and we turn our backs on India. But oh! it seems such a long time to look forward to, and yet time passes rapidly, doesn't it? Fancy, it is over six years since we sailed from Portsmouth. George often talks about you. You know when he first saw you you were a little girl in short frocks, but what a sweet pretty child you were. Many a time has he said that, had you been a little older, he would have married you in preference to me. Of course he says that to tease me. But if your last photograph you sent me doesn't flatter you, I declare I should be afraid of George falling in love with you. You don't believe this, do you? It's only my fun,

and I wish you could put it to the test. George is such a darling, doting old boy, that not Venus herself, I am sure, could turn him from me, although I have been his wife for upwards of eight years. I declare I seem to be growing quite an old woman.

“By the way, we heard recently that the 12th Lancers are under orders for India. They are to relieve the 10th Hussars, who have been on foreign service for fourteen years. When I first met George he was a captain in the 12th. It is funny that his old regiment should come out while we are here. It is very likely they will put in part of their time in Meerut. Well now, dear, I must close my letter. Tell me everything when you write, there’s a darling. My prayers are ever for you.

“Your loving sister,

“MADGE PRITCHARD.”

CHAPTER VIII.

THE HAND OF FATE.

THE people with whom Hester was sojourning were relatives of Mr. Dellaby's. Their name was Judson, and they had a daughter called Florence who was Hester's half-cousin. The two girls were about the same age, so that Hester did not lack companionship. Florence was a charming girl, and was engaged to a young man who had recently passed a very successful examination, and received an appointment in the Civil Service. Of course she was elated, and seemed never to tire of talking about her "dear boy" Reginald, or Reg, as she fondly called him. Hester on her part observed a discreet silence. Most girls in her position would

have poured out their woes, and have sought sympathy from a companion like Flo. But she did nothing of the kind. As a matter of fact, her love affair was not a thing she cared to discuss, for had she mentioned it at all she must have referred to that humiliating scene between herself, Hallett, and her father, and she could never recall that without a sense of burning shame. So she listened to her friend, and lent a sympathetic ear to all she had to say, and her own secret, her own sorrow, she kept locked fast in the recesses of her heart. The house where she was staying was beautifully situated. Woodland, dell, and stream combined to make up a perfect landscape, which was shut in by rugged and scarped hills. There was a repose and restfulness about the place that accorded well with her mood, and she was never tired of wandering about the lanes and woods, for she was a great lover of Nature, and Nature's many tuneful voices delighted and pleased her. But though all her surroundings were genial and to her

tastes, they could not possibly wean her thoughts from Hallett. Over and over again was she tempted to write to him, but she resisted the temptation, for had she not given her pledge and promise to refrain from writing or making any attempt to see him for three months? To Love's impatience how like an eternity does three months seem. It is but an infinitesimal space of time when measured by the span of swift-rolling years, which so soon, alas! sweep us through our lives, and into that "great beyond," where there is an unbroken silence and a sleep that knoweth no dreams. But to a young girl whose heart has gone out towards him who has become her idol, and who is separated from her, how long, weary, and leaden-footed do the lagging hours seem. Where Hester felt her enforced inaction so much, was in the thought that he might deem her false and fickle, and when that thought did surge through her brain, she felt as if she could not control herself; that she must rush away, do some-

thing, break the seal that had been put upon her, though it was at the cost of her solemnly pledged word; and yet, on the other hand, how could she efface from memory's tablets the words she had uttered to him on the memorable night when she had walked with him under the shadow of Arthur's Seat—that night when her father had brought the blushes of a stinging wrong and shame to her cheeks.

“Will you trust me, Hester?” Jack had asked.

“Aye, with my life; with the essence of my life, my woman's heart,” she had answered. Now, unless those were mere windy words, was the pledge—for it was a pledge—to pass for nothing? Were they to have no binding effect upon her conscience? for let it be remembered how great was her faith in Hallett. Had he not declared with an emphasis of assurance that carried conviction with it, that he and his race had ever placed honour above worldly gain? and, unless it was a mere lover's

phrase, she must set it in the balance against her father's prejudice, for which he had shown no better warrant than some story he had been told about a boyish escapade.

So poor Hester struggled with her heart, her thoughts, her desires, and she felt like one in a wilderness crying for sympathy; but her cry had to be stifled, and she had to wear a smile when she was ready to weep, and weeping would have been far more in consonance with her feelings.

"Does he dream of me?" she asked herself. "Will he continue to respect me? Will he wear my image in his heart during the dreadful three months? Oh, for some sign," she moaned, "some sign to tell him I am true to him and he to me!"

A sign came at last, but it was not what she hoped, wished, and prayed for.

She was sitting in her bedroom one evening. A charming little room it was, and filled with many a nick-nack of feminine taste and fancy. An oriel and latticed

window commanded an exquisite view. She had thrown the casement open and watched the gloaming fade until the hills became shadowy and indistinct, and then the moon arose and spread a sheen of silver over the scene. Pensive she was and full of dreaming. How could it be otherwise? She was but in life's morning, and it is in the morning of our lives that we dream dreams, for youth is a time of desire; manhood of realization; old age of regret. When our fire burns low, and the ashes are turning white upon the hearth, we cast our eyes back over the track we have travelled, and sigh for the broken idols that we have found to be only delusive clay. "Alas!" we think, "we might have done so differently had we but known."

It is well, indeed, that we do not know as we stand upon the threshold of our career, for if it were given to us to tear aside the curtain that screens the future from our eyes, we should often shrink back appalled, and with white lips curse the fate

that had given us the breath of life. And so Hester sat in an all-absorbed way gazing out to where the moon's rays shimmered on and transfigured the stream until it resembled a channel of agitated molten silver. And the pine trees on the hills, blended into solid shadow, could be likened to the portals at the entrance of some dark abode of mystery. Indeed, on such a night, the reins of fancy being free, nothing is too extravagant for the imagination, for it is on such a night that the real becomes unreal, and shapes and forms that are but airy nothings—phantasms of the darkness—flit before our vision. Perhaps Hester was trying to evolve out of the visions of the moonlit landscape, something that she could construe into a prophecy of her future, some sign that would give her comfort in her great distress. Anyway, she was so wrapped in thought that she heard not a tap at her door, and when the door opened and a white-clad figure glided in, and a voice exclaimed—"Why, Hetty, girl, are

you moonstruck?" she sprang up with a cry, and said—"Oh, Flo, how you startled me!"

"Why, I thought you must be asleep, for I knocked twice, and could get no answer," replied Flo, merrily. "But whatever are you sitting in the dark for? Why, if I were to sit in the dark like that I should see ghosts. Ugh! I hate ghosts. My teeth chatter at the thought of 'em. Here, let's have a light. Where are the matches and the lamp? I've got them; it's all right. There, that's better. Now then, if you're a good girl, and promise you won't go mooning any more, I'll give you a letter."

"Has the mail-bag come in?" asked Hester, with a little fluttering of the heart.

"Yes, about ten minutes ago, and I've got a letter from my dear old boy, and there's one for you; not from my dear old boy, of course not, but I shouldn't be surprised now if *yours* is a love-letter. It's addressed in a man's handwriting, at any

rate. Now, I'm going to sit and devour every word of mine, and suck in all the kisses he sends me, so don't speak to me for half-an-hour."

She dropped down on an ottoman to feast on her lover's words, and as poor Hester glanced at the superscription on the envelope that Flo had thrust into her hand her heart leapt up, as the saying is, and the hot blood rushed into her face, for she recognized Hallett's handwriting. It was the letter he had posted to her just before he sailed with his regiment for Persia. For some moments she hesitated what to do. Could she trust herself in Flo's presence to read what he had written? But Flo seemed so utterly gone, so entirely without eyes save for the burning lines that her sweetheart had penned, that her presence could be ignored; and so kneeling by the table on which stood the lamp, Hester opened her letter with very varied emotions agitating her. She unfolded the paper, and when she had finished the perusal of the

communication, every word of which was like a stab to her, she uttered a moan, and, bowing her head on her arms, burst into tears. Then up jumped Flo, and clasping her friend in a tender and sympathetic embrace, said—

“What is it, Hetty dear? Confide in me. Have you had some bad news?”

It was some moments before Hester could collect herself sufficiently to answer. She held the letter tightly clasped in her hand, and sobbed.

“Hetty darling, what is it? Do tell me,” urged her companion.

Then Hester gave her friend the letter, saying, “Read for yourself,” and, rising, she paced the room while Florence ran her eyes hurriedly over Jack’s missive.

“A lovers’ quarrel,” remarked Florence at last. “You did not tell me you had a lover, though I understand now why you did not. But, look here, Hetty, that man evidently loves you yet, and you love him, or why do you weep? I suppose the fact is

you've had some silly tiff, and he has taken himself off, and you are breaking your heart. Well, hang me, if it was my case, if I wouldn't follow him all over the world. For he vows a vow by his honour and on his soul that no one shall replace you. A man's vows are not always to be believed in, but that fellow swears deeply, and if you love him—well, you know there cannot be love without faith and trust. I have faith in my lad. I know he wouldn't deceive me, and I hope yours won't."

By this time Hester had regained her self-possession, and, having now betrayed herself so far, she felt that it would not do to halt midway, and thus allow her friend to remain under a wrong impression. That would certainly be a mistake, and might be productive of harm. So she told her the whole story, concealing nothing, but laying bare every detail. Flo listened with an intelligent interest, and, though she was by disposition somewhat frivolous and at times light-headed, she showed now,

when occasion required it, that she could be sensible and womanly, and sitting with her chin resting on her hands, the tips of her fingers on her lips, the while her eyes were bent earnestly on the lamp globe as though she had some hope that she might draw therefrom inspiration to talk to her kinswoman in words of wisdom, for wisdom was wanted in such crisis as this. And when she had thus pondered for a time, she murmured without changing her position—

“It’s a serious business, Hetty, old girl.”

“Yes,” moaned Hester, distressfully, “for he has gone away under the impression that I have deceived him.”

“Had you no idea he was going?” and Flo abandoned the lamp now that she might look at the sorrowful, tear-wet face of her friend.

“Not the slightest.”

“Well, he has been hard hit, Hetty,” cried Flo, rising up and entwining her arms about Hester’s neck.

“It is terrible to think that he believes

me false. Oh, what a fool I've been! My mother had no business to exact that promise from me, and I was an idiot to give it. Tell me, Flo dear, what shall I do?"

This was a little too much for Flo. She felt to the full the responsibility thus suddenly thrust upon her in being called upon to act as adviser in such a complicated and delicate case. She released her hold of her friend, sat down upon the ottoman again, crossed her legs, clasped her hands about her knee, and stared fixedly at the case—ment, and not for many moments did she venture on a reply, but when she did it only served to show how bewildered she was.

"Upon my word, Hester, I don't know," was the answer.

"You said just now," remarked Hester, "that if it was your case you would follow your lover over the world."

"Oh, yes!" exclaimed Flo responsively, and looking somewhat startled, "but one is apt to say things on the spur of the moment

one does not altogether mean in a case of this kind. You see you've got your father and mother to consider. You are their only child, you know, at home. Upon my word it's a ticklish business."

Hester, who had continued to pace the room during the colloquy that had passed, knelt now before her friend and placed her hands on her shoulders, looking her full in the face, while with an impressive earnestness she said—

"Flo, put yourself in my place, or, better still, make my case yours. Suppose a breach not of your making had occurred between you and Reg, and supposing Reg, under a misapprehension that you were false to him, had started for a far distant land; and supposing you loved him with all the love a woman is capable of bearing for a man, what would you do? Would you fold your hands and say, it is willed so? Would you with a submissive meekness simper, 'It cannot be helped; I must make the best of it'?"

Flo was not equal to answering these questions. She showed by the distressful look on her pretty face that it was too great a tax upon her mental powers, or rather, if the strict truth must be told, she was afraid to answer as otherwise she might have answered, for she did not wish Mr. and Mrs. Dellaby to reproach her with having influenced their daughter. Therefore she endeavoured to dissemble somewhat, and with some halting of speech she answered—

“Well, the fact is, Hetty, I—I—upon my word, I don’t know how I should act. It is difficult to tell what one would do in an imaginary case.”

“But mine is not an imaginary case.”

“No, dear, but how can I advise you?”

“Of course, I might have known that you could not advise me,” replied Hester, with an irony that passed unnoticed, however, and rising up, she walked up and down again, while Flo, after some reflection, remarked—

“I tell you what, Hester. I think you

ought to write and tell your mother what has happened."

"Do you?" said Hester, feeling bitterly sarcastic, and speaking with something like a sneer.

"Yes. You see one's mother after all is one's best friend."

"Sometimes."

"Well, I know *this*, I shouldn't like to think that my mother wasn't my best friend. But look here, there's the supper gong. Brush your hair straight and let us go down."

"Flo, I want you to make me a promise," said Hester, as she caught her cousin's hand.

"What is it?"

"I want you to promise me very solemnly that you won't mention to a living soul that I have had a letter from Jack."

"Well, of course, if you wish me not to do so, I won't. But still I think you ought to tell your aunt and uncle. I am sure they will advise you well."

"No, not a word shall pass my lips on

the subject, and unless your protestations of love for me are false, you will promise me to keep silent."

"Oh, of course I'll promise," answered Flo, "though I don't agree with secrecy on an occasion like this."

"Well, Flo," said Hester, "we'll agree to differ in opinion, but I have your promise, and I'll hold you to it. Come, let us go down."

The two girls joined the rest of the family at supper, and though Hester tried to look cheerful and be amiable, she was conscious that the effort was, partially at least, if not totally, a failure. The time seemed to lag so, for she was all impatient to be alone with her thoughts.

"Are you not well, Hester, this evening?" asked her aunt, with an anxious manifestation of concern.

"Oh, yes, aunt; well, that is, I have a headache. I think I will go to bed soon."

"Do, dear," replied the lady. "And look here, Flo, don't you keep your cousin up as

you have been in the habit of doing every night. Why, last night I heard you chattering till after twelve. You send her out of your room, Hester, and lock the door. She is such a dreadful girl to talk. I believe she would sit up all night if she could get any one to talk to. She likes the sound of her own voice, and would hold conversation with her shadow if it would answer her back."

Of course there was general laughter at this, and Flo protested that her mother was libelling her. In a little while ten struck by the mantelpiece clock, and Mrs. Judson, noticing that her niece was looking very weary, urged her to retire. Hester was only too glad of the excuse to do so, and hurried to her room, having previously wished Flo good-night as a sign that she wished not to be disturbed.

When she was alone Hester drew out Jack's letter, and re-read and re-read it again. Every word he had written caused her a pang, and pitilessly did she blame

herself for not having sent him some consolatory sentence that would have conduced to a better understanding. It was very dreadful for her to think that he should have gone away believing her to be so weak, so frivolous, so changeable, that in spite of pledge and protest, she had with the first adverse wind let him drift from her; and was it not possible that the current that was bearing him away was separating them for ever? It was something to be assured by him—and she had unbroken faith in all that he said—that no one should supplant her in his heart; but, after all, there was but poor satisfaction in that, and it offered no compensation for the bitterness of the cruel separation, for they had, as it were, been wrenched asunder, and he had left believing her to be without any will of her own.

These and similar thoughts that troubled her kept sleep away for several hours, and it was only when she had firmly resolved to send a letter after her lover by the very

next post that she sank for the time being into forgetfulness of her sorrow.

With the coming of the morrow a new prospect was suggested to her, for the mid-day mail placed her in possession of Madge's letter. She had spent all the morning in writing to Hallett, but after perusing her sister's letter she came to another resolution, and she tore up what she had written. A little later she informed her relatives that she intended to return home at the end of the week. They were rather surprised at the suddenness of the decision, though Flo understood the cause, and that afternoon as she and her cousin took their usual stroll she said—

“Hester, your going home so unexpectedly has something to do with Hallett's letter.”

“You said, dear, when you first read it,” Hester answered, “that if it was your case you would follow your lover all over the world.”

“So I did.”

“Well, I have had a letter to-day from Madge, and she expresses a strong wish for me to go out to India and visit her.”

“And you are going?” cried Flo, opening wide her blue eyes in astonishment at this bold decision.

“Yes.”

“But supposing your people object?”

“Under the circumstances their objection will have no effect.”

“Do you mean to say you would go in spite of them?”

“I mean to say their objection would be so unreasonable that I should feel justified in taking my fate in my own hands. But you must remember I am going to my married sister, and she will advise and counsel me. My father is blindly prejudiced, and my mother is entirely influenced by him. Therefore I look to my only sister for advice.”

“Well, perhaps you are right,” murmured Flo, “and yet it is a bold step.”

Hester was not indifferent to the fact that the act she contemplated was certainly bold in its way, but she felt as if Madge's letter had arrived at that important juncture of affairs in order to point out to her the course she should pursue. At any rate, Madge's invitation was so opportune that she could not afford to regard it with indifference, and she intended to treat it diplomatically. If there was anything in her conduct which, even by a straining of the law of ethics, could be construed into deceit, she was prepared to justify it. Her happiness, the whole well-being of her life, was at stake, and she was quite prepared to risk everything on her own opinion.

In accordance with the arrangements she had made, she returned to Edinburgh at the end of the week, having previously apprised her parents of her coming. Necessarily they were astonished, and Mr. Dellaby even had some misgivings, for, of course, he did not know that Hallett had left Edin-

burgh ; but his mind felt somewhat relieved when Hester laid her reasons for coming back so soon before him.

As she expected would be the case at first, he showed himself rather averse to the contemplated visit to India, but as Hester urged her sister wished her very much to go, and she herself was yearning to go, then he began to change his views ; and, moreover, it dawned upon him that it might be the means of most effectually separating Hester and Jack, for, as already stated, he had not the remotest idea of Jack's departure, and Hester resolved to keep that secret to herself, whatever the consequences might be. The result was, her father informed her that he would take a few days to consider the matter, and during the interim he consulted his wife, as was his wont. Contrary to his usual course, he allowed himself to be influenced by her to the extent that while he wavered somewhat at first, he made up his mind finally, for Mrs. Dellaby, though averse to

parting with Hester for so long, deemed it a good thing that she should go, and she told her husband so, with the result that he declared she was right.

“It will do the girl good,” he said, “and, of course, Madge will look after her well; in fact, we will write to Madge and tell her about this silly affair. At any rate, before the girl comes back I have not the slightest doubt she will have forgotten all about this young upstart, and perhaps under her sister’s guidance she will have formed a new and desirable attachment, for I suppose we must make up our minds to hand her over to a husband some day.”

His wife endorsed that, and so, being mutually agreed, he subsequently informed Hester that it was decided she should pay a visit to Madge, and she could make her preparations at once. In the meantime, he would write to certain of his friends, who would take means to ensure the lady being well looked after during the voyage out, and a letter was also dispatched to Madge, asking

her to meet her sister on her arrival in Calcutta.

Hester was delighted, and, yielding to an irresistible impulse to write to Hallett, she penned and dispatched to him the following brief note :—

“Whither thou goest, there go I also. You have deemed me false. You shall prove me true. I am going to India to my sister, who is at Meerut. Perhaps, as time moves on, we shall meet. Don’t think me weak. Don’t despise me when I say you have carried my heart off, and since I cannot live without it, I must seek it.”

CHAPTER IX.

A HAPPY REUNION.

ON a dusty plain, at a distance of less than forty miles in a north-west direction from Delhi, stands the city of Meerut. At the time of the great mutiny it was a strong military centre. From an early period in the history of the "Company Bahadoor," as the East India Company was called by the natives, Meerut had been regarded as of considerable importance from a military point of view. It was considered to be one of the most convenient stations in the North-West Provinces, and was noted for its extensive cantonments, European and native.

In this place the scene of the story is

now for the time being laid. It is early in the month of March 1857. The summer heats have not yet set in, and though at midday the sun is powerful, the mornings and the evenings are deliciously cool. A little later in the year the heat of these plains is almost intolerable to Europeans, and ladies and children especially suffer much. March, however, is pleasant enough, and it was particularly so in '57, for the winter had been exceptionally cool—that is, for India, of course.

In one of the best parts of the town, and not far from the English lines, stood a large bungalow surrounded with an extensive and well-kept garden or “compound,” in which the spring flowers made a magnificent show. As was usual in European houses of this class, the garden was walled in by a mud wall, which was almost hidden from view by jungly undergrowth, while cocoa palms, interspersed by mango trees, overshadowed it. This place was the Indian home of Lieutenant-Colonel Pritchard and his family.

He had been stationed in Meerut for a considerable time, and as it seemed then he was destined to remain for some time longer; for though signs had appeared, like handwriting on the wall, they had been ignored. It was known that a spirit of discontent was abroad; but the authorities had chosen to ignore it, and the Europeans never dreamed of the terrible storm that was brewing; and amongst those who most firmly believed the natives were staunch as a body, was Lieutenant-Colonel Pritchard. Whenever he had heard fears expressed of possible danger, he had laughed scornfully, saying that he was prepared to stake his all on the fidelity of the Sepoys, who, he averred, clearly recognized how closely their interests were bound up with those of the white rulers, who, whatever their faults had been in the past, were then beyond reproach. It is singular that his opinion should have been so extensively indulged in by those who ought to have been able to see the way the clouds were drifting.

It is true there had been great and formidable military mutinies in the past, and more than once the power of the "John Company" had been threatened. Only as recently as 1856 there had been a rising at Vellore, in the Madras Presidency, where two Sepoy battalions attacked the European soldiers and slaughtered one hundred and thirteen of them. These murders had been fearfully avenged, for eight hundred of the Sepoys fell before the terrific onslaught of the 19th Dragoons under Colonel Gillespie, who was ordered to put down the "riot" as it was called. The dissatisfaction which led to this outbreak was looked upon, strangely enough, as quite local, and men who had the temerity to hint at a widespread discontent seething throughout the native army were laughed at. Again, during 1856, small cakes of bread called chupatties were carried from village to village, and delivered to the head man of each place. It was well known that this was some strange and secret kind of freemasonry, but not the

slightest significance was attached to it by those who ought to have known better and have been better informed. And so the British continued to live in a false sense of security. Beneath their feet was a volcano, but they knew it not, though the crust was getting daily thinner and thinner.

Colonel Pritchard was seated on the verandah of his bungalow in company with his wife, his sister-in-law Hester—who had only arrived from Calcutta a few days before—and two or three other officers and their wives. One of these officers was a Captain Sandon, who had seen much service, and done excellent work in the Crimean campaign. He was a young man of stalwart proportions, and a dark, handsome face. Every inch a soldier, and being ambitious to distinguish himself, he had purchased a commission in a crack cavalry regiment, and had been in India about six months.

Hester appeared to be exceedingly well. The voyage had evidently agreed with her,

and she had not been long enough in the Indian climate to feel its effects. Madge was a fine-looking woman, and her husband was an equally fine-looking man. They seemed, indeed, to be a very well-matched couple. The little party were partaking of afternoon tea, and were very merry and happy. As may be supposed, Hester was an object of peculiar interest, for she was fresh from the dear old country where there were so many ties, so many loved ones; and, of course, she had numberless questions to answer and much to tell. "Handsome Sandon," as he had come to be called, was particularly attentive to her; and this, and the burning glances with which he regarded her now and again, did not escape the notice of Mrs. Pritchard, who, although she had been to Calcutta to meet her sister, had had so many other things to talk about, that she had found no time to touch upon any affairs of the heart. Nor had Hester so far breathed a syllable about her connection with Hallett. Nevertheless, he was

ever present in her thoughts, and she burned with an eager desire to know where he was, if he had received her note, and if he thought of her as she thought of him.

Sandon had only that very day been introduced to Hester. Mrs. Pritchard had organized a little excursion to a ruined temple on the banks of the Goomtee, and he was included in the invitations. But he had certainly made the best use of his time, and had shown a decided preference for the young lady's company.

"What do you think of this country, Miss Dellaby, so far as you have seen it?" he asked, as he sat next to her at the little tea-table on the verandah, and lost no opportunity of paying her attention.

"Oh, I am charmed with it so far. Everything is so new to me, so strange, so fascinating. My sister, who is a capital correspondent and an excellent describer, had given me a good idea what to expect, but still no description can come up to actual

experience, and no description could give one an adequate idea of the movement, the colour, the brilliancy, the novel sights and sounds and scenes which are peculiar to India."

"True," answered Sandon a little thoughtfully. "And yet after all India is not the place one would care to end one's days in from choice. Are you going to remain long?"

"I don't know. Possibly a year."

"A year!" echoed Sandon. Then he sighed, and added—"It strikes me a year will see wonderful changes in India."

"There," cried Mrs. Pritchard, with a merry laugh, "I declare, Captain, you are at it again. Do you know, Hetty dear, Captain Sandon is a regular Job's comforter, and is always predicting dreadful things for us."

"Well, you see," put in Colonel Pritchard, "he hates, or believes he hates, the natives. When he has known them as

long as I have, he will perhaps change his opinion."

"No, I don't think so," replied Sandon. "I am sufficiently acquainted with their history to mistrust them, and the many little outbreaks recently have served to show—at any rate I think so—that there is a smouldering fire which, if it once gets a fair start, will set the whole country in a blaze."

"My dear boy, you are prejudiced and a pessimist," laughed Colonel Pritchard.

"Perhaps I am prejudiced," answered Sandon slowly, as he stroked his moustache, "for at the affair at Vellore last year, my only brother, Lieutenant Sandon, a splendid lad, and the hope and pride of his widowed mother, was killed. I confess I should like to have the opportunity of avenging his murder."

"Pray don't let us talk about such things," cried Mrs. Pritchard, with a little shudder. "Better to be cheerful than gloomy. If

trouble is coming, I dare say we shall be prepared to cope with it. We have a fine array of brave men——”

“And beautiful women to inspire them with valour,” remarked Sandon, with a furtive glance at Hester.

“Sheodeen,” called Mrs. Pritchard, addressing one of the native servants in attendance, “tell the ayah to bring the children here.”

The man salaamed and departed, and Hester, in order to keep up the conversation, asked Captain Sandon if he had yet made the acquaintance of her sister’s children.

“Yes, Miss Dellaby, I have,” he answered.

“And don’t you think them very pretty?”

“Yes; I do indeed. I think they are two of the prettiest and best-behaved children I have ever seen.”

Mrs. Pritchard’s face coloured with conscious pride, as she thus heard her darlings spoken of. And in a few moments the merry ringing laughter of the children was heard

as they came rushing on to the verandah, followed by their native nurse, who made a salaam to the company, and then stood in the respectful attitude common to her class. Both the children ran to Hester, and, climbing on to her knee, struggled with each other for the privilege of having their arms round her neck and kissing her.

“Now, dearies, don’t be rude or rough,” said their mother, as a warning that they were to be less impetuous, and to restrain their ardour.

“Mamma,” exclaimed Fred, speaking apparently for himself and his sister, “we are not rough, and we are not rude. We can do as we like with our auntie. Can’t we, auntie?”

“Yes, sweeties, of course you can,” and she hugged them both.

“Oh, yes,” remarked Mrs. Pritchard pleasantly, “your aunt is sure to spoil you. I suppose my nose will be put quite out of joint now that your aunt is here.”

“Oh, ma, what a funny thing to say,” screamed little Amy, with a childish laugh. “I am sure me and Freddy are not going to touch your nose, are we, auntie?”

Of course there was general laughter at this, in which the children joined, seeming to regard it as a huge joke that their mother should talk of having her nose put out of joint, and attached a literal meaning to what was a mere idiom. They were without doubt sweet, pretty children; both of them being of the purest Saxon type; fair, transparent skin, regular features, pronounced blue eyes, light golden hair, which, in the boy's case, clustered in long ringlets about his neck and shoulders. They were great favourites, and much petted, as it was but natural they should be; and yet they had not been spoilt, for their father was strongly averse to making them into “milksons” as he termed it.

As might be supposed, Hester was very proud of her little nephew and niece, and

nothing seemed to delight them more than to be with her, while the fond and happy mother, now that she had got her sister, felt as if her cup of joy was nearly full. All that was wanted to complete it was the presence of her parents.

Presently the little company rose to depart, for the short Indian twilight had ended, and the night had come. Overhead was a canopy of brilliant stars, and on the languorous air rose the voices of the many insects that the night brings forth in India, while muffled by distance came the sounds of the mournful tom-toms, as the natives sang their wailing songs after their evening meal. Just as the ladies and gentlemen were about to go, a mounted orderly, fully accoutred, rode into the compound, and drew rein at the door of the bungalow. He had evidently ridden hard, for his horse was panting, and he himself was perspiring and covered with dust. Knowing that the man's business was with him, Colonel Pritchard went to him, and received some

dispatches from his hand, and the trooper, having performed his duty, saluted, and turning his horse rode off again, while the Colonel retired to his room to read the official documents he had received.

In a little while Mrs. Pritchard and her sister were alone on the verandah. The ladies and gentlemen had departed, and the children had gone off with their ayah to be prepared for bed. Before he went away Captain Sandon had shaken Hester's hand very cordially, and expressed a hope that he might soon have the pleasure of seeing her again.

"It's quite a treat, dear, to have you all to myself once more," exclaimed Mrs. Pritchard, as she leaned back in her large lounge chair, with Hester beside her in a similar chair. "I declare since you came my head seems to have been in a whirl, what with visitors and visiting, and the chicks, who have taken up so much of your time; and one thing and another, really I have had very little chance of asking you anything

about yourself. Now, tell me, what do you think of Captain Sandon?"

"He seems very nice," answered Hester, and speaking in a manner suggestive of her thoughts being far off.

"Yes; and if I'm any judge, Hetty, he's smitten with you already. He's a good fellow, a brave soldier, and a member of a distinguished family. It is said he will succeed to a very large fortune some day."

Hetty laid her hand on her sister's wrist, and said in a tone of anxiety—

"Madge darling, don't let me sail under false colours; and don't think me wicked or deceitful when I tell you that not the least inducement for me to come out here was the fact that the man who has my heart is in this part of the globe."

Madge's face was a study in its expression of surprise, as, half starting up, she turned towards her sister, upon whom the full rays of the shaded lamp that stood on the little table fell, and exclaimed—

"Hetty dear, why did you not tell me this before?"

"Because I have had no opportunity."

"And where is this man?"

"Alas! I know not. He is somewhere in Persia."

"That is vague. Persia is a large place. But what is he?"

"A soldier."

"Oh, that is another thing. He can be easily found then. I suppose he is an officer?"

"Yes."

"But how is it you don't know where he is stationed? Have you quarrelled?"

"Yes and no. But hush! I will tell you all by and by."

At this point Colonel Pritchard had come upon the verandah. He was dressed in his uniform, was booted and spurred, and the champing of a bit and the neighing of a steed told that his horse waited for him. Both the ladies started up, and his wife exclaimed—

“Why, George, whatever is the meaning of this? I did not know that you had any regimental duty to-night.”

“Nor did I, dear. But I have received some very important orders from the General in command, and I am to repair at once to his house, and hold myself in readiness for an immediate journey.”

“What does this mean, darling?” asked his wife with a little shudder, while her face paled, and, throwing her arms about him, she nestled to him—

“Why, nothing, I should say,” laughed the Colonel in his habitual cheery way. “That is, nothing that you need alarm yourself about. These little surprises are incidental to a soldier’s life, you know, and, having recently been appointed one of the General’s staff officers, I am liable to this sort of thing.”

“You will, of course, return here before you go away,” said his wife, the anxious expression of her face in no way lessened.

“ Well, yes, certainly ; I shall if I can.”

He kissed her, shook the hand of his sister-in-law, and, exclaiming that he had already kissed the children, he sprang into his saddle and galloped off.

CHAPTER X.

A SECRET MISSION.

For a little time after the departure of her husband Mrs. Pritchard seemed dull. She could not quite dismiss from her mind an idea that there was something ominous in his being so suddenly summoned to the commanding officer's presence. Dispatches of great importance must have been received by the commander, or he would not have called his staff together, especially at such an hour. When the children came on to the verandah to say good-night to their mother and aunt, which they did soon after their father's departure, she clasped them with an expression of fervour to her bosom, and kissing them again and again she murmured—

“God bless you, darlings; God bless you. How I wish we were all at home again!”

“What is it, Madge?” asked her sister in a tone of alarm. “What has upset you?”

“Oh, nothing, dear. A momentary weakness, that is all. I am very stupid. I think I am getting nervous in my old age. But it is only when I think of the dear children,” and she wiped the gathering tears from her eyes. Then kissing the children, and after their aunt had embraced them, she sent them away with their ayah; and as it wanted yet half-an-hour to the dinner, she settled herself down in the chair once more, and said to her sister—

“Let’s see, dear, you were going to tell me about some lover of yours. A wild romance I suppose it is, especially as you say he was the sole inducement for you to come out here.”

“Ah, Madge, that is not fair. I did not say that. I said he was not the least inducement.”

“Well, Hetty, that is going very near

the whole thing. But there, let me hear the story. I will judge you afterwards."

Hester did not like the tone in which her sister spoke. She knew that Madge had a tremendous opinion of her father's wisdom, and believed that he could not err. It was a knowledge of this fact which had made Hester somewhat reluctant to tell her story, for she could not disguise from herself that there was a probability of Madge siding with her father. But there seemed no getting out of it now, nor could she conscientiously suppress anything, so she told the tale in its entirety, omitting nothing.

Madge listened with a grave face, and said when the story was finished—

"I think, dear, you have been very foolish, and I don't see how I can give you my sympathy. You may depend upon it, our father's objection was based upon exceedingly good grounds. He would view the matter without bias, without prejudice."

"On the contrary, Madge. He was as strongly prejudiced as he could be," cried

Hester in anxiety, as she saw that her worst fears were realized, and her own sister was now arrayed against her in this love affair.

“Very well then, if that was so I am sure he was justified. He is not the man to do anything rashly, and you must not forget that he has your interests at heart. He is anxious about your future, and desirous of securing your welfare and happiness.”

“But, Madge, Jack vowed to me on his sacred honour that there was nothing against him.”

“Ah, dear, a man’s vows are not always to be trusted,” replied Madge, with a little cynical laugh, though cynicism was as foreign to her nature as it could well be. But she had something of her father’s “hard-headedness,” and his belief in the soundness of his own judgment; and having made up her mind on a given question, she was rather apt to think that she could not possibly be wrong.

“Did you not believe in George’s vows?” asked Hester pointedly.

"Oh, yes, but that was different altogether. George is a treasure, and father approved of him."

"So is Jack a treasure, though father doesn't approve of him. But then, as I say, that is mere prejudice, and I believe Hallett to be the very soul of honour."

"Every woman, I suppose, thinks her lover the soul of honour," urged Madge, "but women are sometimes, oftentimes, in fact, deceived and betrayed, and the vaunted honour is found to be a delusion and a snare. But do not think me unkind, dear. I do not want to stand in the way of your happiness, Heaven forbid, and yet how can I encourage you to go against your father's wishes? I am sure, if he knew that you had come out to India on Hallett's account he would never forgive you."

Hester was silent and distressed, but she tried hard to conceal her distress. She knew now that she would have to fight her battle alone, though it seemed particularly hard that she should have all her house

against her. The dinner-bell rang at this moment, and Madge, rising, linked her arm in her sister's and kissed her, saying—

“Don't distress yourself, dearie. I will make inquiries about young Hallett. But I do hope you will try to forget him. You know how unforgiving father is, and I am sure if you went against his wishes he would disown you.”

Hester still remained silent. She felt it was no use giving vent to her feelings when she had only an unsympathetic ear to pour her woes into. But her hopes had certainly been dashed a little, though she mentally resolved that she would be true to Jack, unless he proved himself to be a thorough-paced vagabond, which she could not deem in the least degree possible, let alone probable.

The dinner was half finished when Colonel Pritchard returned hastily. His face was unusually grave, and this did not escape the notice of his wife, who exclaimed—

"What is it, dear? Is there anything seriously the matter?"

"No, Madge."

"You say no in a qualified way. Your face says yes."

"There is really nothing that you need alarm yourself about, Madge," he answered.

"It appears that the Government has received some anonymous information that in certain districts there have been secret meetings of the natives, and resolutions threatening destruction to the Feringhees have been passed. A dispatch, therefore, has been sent to the commanding officers of all the stations requesting them to verify if possible or prove the information false. I may tell you, however, that General Hewett does not attach much importance to the report. At any rate, even supposing it's true, what then? We are strong enough to cope with any mutinous spirit that may display itself."

Madge shuddered as she answered—

"We think so. But should our native

soldiers turn against us the consequences may be frightful."

"Tut, little woman," said her husband as he patted her cheek and kissed her. "Don't get such ideas into your head. Our native troops are staunch. I would trust them anywhere."

"God grant it may be so," sighed Madge fervently. "But sit down, dear, and have your dinner. I am sure you must be hungry."

"I am hungry," answered her husband as he took his place at the table and began his soup. "But I have very little time."

"What do you mean?" asked Madge quickly.

"I have to leave Meerut to-night."

"To leave Meerut!" exclaimed Madge, catching her breath.

"Yes. Now don't alarm yourself. There is no significance in it."

"But where are you going to?"

"To Bombay."

"To Bombay!" echoed his wife, as the

alarm she felt gleamed from her eyes and flushed her face. "That is a long journey."

"Yes, but I do not expect to be absent more than three weeks."

"But why are you going, dear?"

"I am going on a special mission which I am not allowed to reveal even to my own wife. It is Government business; but this much I may tell you—it has reference to certain Government stores."

Madge asked no further questions. She was a soldier's wife, and she knew that duty was the first consideration with a soldier; and when he was ordered to go anywhere or do anything, he must go or do it in spite of loved ones or home ties.

The Colonel made a very hasty meal the while his soldier servant was busy packing his clothes in his bedroom; and as he rose from the table he said—

"Well, Hester, I hope Madge will make you as comfortable as she possibly can. In

fact, I am sure she will. You will find this is not half a bad place. There is good society, and you will have a jolly time. I saw Captain Sandon at the General's, and I asked him to look after you in my absence. He is a fine fellow is Sandon. I like him. He is a thorough gentleman, and has a most honourable record as a soldier. He will distinguish himself if he gets a chance; I'm sure of that. I think, Hetty, old girl, you might set your cap at him. He is worth playing for."

Pritchard laughed, and Hester got up a little smile, though it was forced. Then her brother-in-law went in to kiss the children, and his wife followed him. Both the little tots were asleep, looking sweet and bonnie beneath the mosquito curtains. Their father stooped and kissed them without disturbing them, and he murmured a scarcely audible—

"God bless you, sweet ones."

Madge clasped her husband's arm as he

rose from his stooping position, and looking into his face with an expression of true wifely affection, she said—

“Hester has made a revelation to me to-night, George.”

“Indeed.”

“Yes.”

“A revelation of what?”

“That she is already deeply in love with a young fellow.”

“Where and who is he?”

“He is in Persia, or on his way there, and it is partly on that account that she has come out to us. His name is John Hallett. He is a lieutenant in the 20th.”

“Why, the 20th are on active service in Persia.”

“Yes. It appears that father strongly objected to Hetty keeping company with Hallett, and there was a row. She promised that she wouldn't see him again for a time, and went down to stay with the Judsons at Flodden. While she was there young Hallett started for foreign service, and it

appears wrote to her before leaving, telling her he was going away. She jumped at my invitation to come out here, as she wanted to get away from home, and she assures me now that she will not give Hallett up."

"But what is your father's objection to him?" asked her husband.

"Well, I don't exactly know, but I can't imagine dad taking a prejudice unless he had very good cause to do so, and I should be disposed to argue from that that Hallett is far from a desirable catch for my sister."

"Well, I will make some inquiries about young Hallett. Perhaps Hetty has right on her side when she says she won't give him up. Your father objected to me at first. He said some nasty things, you may remember, about soldiers and sailors not being fit to have wives. However, I haven't time to discuss the matter. Good-bye, old girl. Take care of yourself and the chicks. I will telegraph to you often."

When he reached the door the orderly

was waiting, and holding the two horses. Hester was also standing there, and bade her brother-in-law an affectionate good-bye. And when he had once more kissed her and his wife, he sprang on to his horse, and, followed by his orderly, rode off into the darkness.

CHAPTER XI.

MISUNDERSTOOD.

THAT very night when Hester Dellaby retired to her own room she resolved she would make no further reference to Hallett unless her sister did so; for she was very painfully conscious that Madge by no means sympathized with her. But if she had wanted further evidence of this she had it during breakfast the following morning, when after a little preliminary conversation Mrs. Pritchard said, as she kissed her children and sent them off to their governess in company with their ayah—

“Hester dear, I have been thinking seriously of what you told me last night; and under the circumstances I really cannot

encourage you in your clandestine love-making. In fact I do not think it would be right to father, who I am sure would never have taken such a violent dislike for Hallett unless he had been perfectly satisfied in his own mind that he was not worthy of you. But another thing, dear, I am sure you haven't known Hallett long enough to become so bound up in him that you cannot break the connection—a connection that you now see is decidedly objectionable to your family. It is very likely this young fellow is an adventurer. Lots of men who hold commissions in the army are only gentlemen by courtesy, and their careers won't bear looking into. Besides, if Hallett really loved you as he professed to do, do you suppose he would have gone off in the way he did, without so much as a word of explanation? The fact is he is a wild harum-scarum youngster, I suppose, with plenty of good fighting material in him, very likely, but with no stability, and not in the least likely to make a girl a good husband.

You know, dear, a girl has to be so very careful, for she is so apt to be deceived. I do hope you will not do anything rash."

Hester remained dumb. These words coming from the lips of the sister for whom she bore such strong affection, and in whom she hoped to find an ally, seared her, and she would have wept tears of bitter anguish, had she not kept her feelings in subjection by the strong will which was hers. She was proud too, and her sense of dignity, which was very pronounced, enabled her to seem calm outwardly, while inwardly she was chafing with vexation and annoyance. One remark, however, that her sister made seemed to her to call for instant refutation. The remark was—

"Besides, if Hallett had really loved you as he professed to do, do you suppose he would have gone off in the way he did without so much as a word of explanation?"

To this Hester answered, when she had so far collected herself as to be able to speak with the most perfect self-possession—

“Madge, you are doing Jack” (she liked to speak of him affectionately as “Jack,”) “an unconscious wrong. He did not go off without a word of explanation. If you will excuse me for a few minutes I will let you see a letter he sent me.” She rose from the table and went to her bedroom, returning in a very short time with Jack’s letter; the letter he had penned to her when he was on the eve of leaving England. She handed it to Madge, saying—

“Read that for yourself, and you will confess that it is unfair to say he went off without any explanation.”

Mrs. Pritchard perused the letter, and having done so she folded it up, and returned it to her sister with the curt remark—

“All I’ve got to say, Hetty, is this—I cannot encourage you to keep up the connection with Hallett so long as father objects to him. For in my own mind I am sure that objection must be fully warranted. But I tell you what I’ll do; I’ll write to father,

if you like, and ask him to let me know what his views really are."

A flush spread itself over Hester's face. It was a flush of suppressed anger, as she answered with a decisiveness which could not be mistaken—

"If you do that, Madge, I will leave you."

"Where would you go to?" asked her sister, somewhat alarmed.

"I don't know, and I don't care. Not back home, that you may depend upon. But I will not be treated as a child. I am not a child, and I am not a fool; and rather than submit to what seems to me like parental tyranny, I will take my fate into my own hands."

Madge was very much upset. This spirit of insubordination, for so she regarded it, was to her terrible. She herself had been the most dutiful, the most yielding of daughters; and her father had always appeared to her as the very incarnation of wisdom. To have gainsaid anything that he had said, to have opposed his dictum, would have seemed to

her a sin calling for the very sternest and severest of punishment. Having less control over herself than her sister, her emotion betrayed itself in tears, and, rising from her seat, she twined her arms about Hester's neck, and, kissing her with the most devoted affection, said tenderly—

“Ah, Hetty dear, don't talk like that. We shall not always have our father with us, and it will be terrible if you feel you have anything to reproach yourself with when he is lying in his grave, and you can no longer seek his forgiveness. You *must*, for my sake, for father's sake, for all our sakes, forget Hallett; for how could you possibly reconcile your conscience to marrying him if your father did not approve of him? Poor father! He has been so good to us. He is so anxious about our welfare that it would be downright cruelty to cause him a moment's sorrow.”

Mrs. Pritchard's deep affection for her parents caused her to overlook the possibility of error of judgment on her father's

part. But Hester was clear-headed enough to see that there was nothing to be gained by argument, and in such a case silence on the subject was the wisest policy. Suspense was terribly hard to bear, but what could she do save wait for what time might bring forth? Callousness being no part of her nature, she was much moved by her sister's grief, and thus she answered her—

“There, Madge, don't disturb yourself, dear, or you will make me bitterly regret that I came. We'll agree to sink Hallett for the time being. If it's my fate to have him I shall get him. If not—well, what does it matter? One's heart can only break once.”

“You silly goosey, to talk about your heart breaking,” said Madge, smiling through her tears. “You really don't know yet what love is. But come, don't let us continue this painful subject. The syce is waiting with the buggy. We must have our drive before the sun gets too hot.”

Hester did not pursue the subject, but, returning her sister's warm embrace, retired

to her room to prepare for the morning drive. The days slipped by very rapidly, and had it not been for the anxiety she felt about Hallett, Hester would have been perfectly happy. For her sister did everything she possibly could do to add to her comfort, while the children seemed never so delighted as when they could be with her. There was no lack of society, no lack of entertainment. Something was always going on : amateur theatricals, concerts, excursions, picnics. Time could not hang heavily in a military station of that kind. It is proverbial of soldiers and sailors that they know how to be merry and to enjoy life even under the most adverse circumstances. But in Meerut in those days there was plenty of bustle and stir, and if the daily round of life was somewhat monotonous it certainly did not lack interest ; while flirtation, scandal, and gossip gave a piquancy to existence.

It soon became very obvious to Hester, no less than to her sister, that " Handsome Sandon " was particularly desirous of making

himself more than agreeable to her. He was certainly a fascinating man; at least, he was so to ladies. But even amongst men he was regarded with great favour, for he had all the qualities of a fine soldier, no less than the distinguishing traits of a true gentleman and a punctilious man of honour. At mess, in camp, on parade, in private company, he was always the *preux chevalier*. Deferential but dignified to his superiors, courteous and kindly to his inferiors, tender and gentle to women and children; brimming over with animal spirits, and foremost in everything that could add to the amusement, the comfort, or the well-being of the garrison, there was no wonder he was a universal favourite.

Hester was not indifferent to the attention he paid her, nor could she help liking him. And she would hardly have been human—or, rather, she would have been a womanly phenomenon—if she had failed to experience a sense of satisfaction, even of pride, in having so distinguished, so hand-

some a man dancing attendance upon her, so to speak. Of course envy and jealousy were not absent in such a mixed community, and unkind things were said by those who would have liked to secure Sandon's attentions all to themselves. But if Hester heard of these things she did not allow them to disturb her, and while she enjoyed Captain Sandon's company and admired him for his many good qualities, she had no heart to give, for she had given it to Jack Hallett, and to Jack she was resolved to be true.

Of course Sandon knew nothing of the little episode in her life. She and her sister had mutually agreed that it should be a dead letter, and, in fact, Madge had come to think, judging from the external signs of happiness and contentment that her sister showed, that she was forgetting Hallett, and that in a little time she would laugh at what she would term "the folly of her calf love."

Whatever Hester's feelings of respect and regard for Captain Sandon were, they were

fully reciprocated by him. He was evidently not given to mere tongue flattery, but he made it unmistakably plain that it was not merely a passing admiration that drew him towards her. But if his conduct had been open to doubt, the doubt was soon set at rest, for meeting Mrs. Pritchard one morning on the drive he spoke to her, for she happened to be driving alone, her sister having accompanied some young people on a picnic.

"May I come over to your bungalow this afternoon, Mrs. Pritchard?" he asked. "I want a little conversation with you."

"Oh, certainly, Captain," she answered with a laugh. "And pray what is the subject of the conversation to be?"

"You shall know this afternoon," he replied with a smile, as, bowing graciously, he rode on.

For some minutes after he had left she wondered in her mind what it was he wished to talk about. Then it suddenly dawned upon her, and she thought—"How

dull I am to be sure ! It's Hetty, of course. He is over head and ears in love with the girl, and she must have him. He is no less desirable as a brother-in-law than as a husband. My father, I am sure, could take no exception to him."

It will be gathered from this that Captain Sandon had certainly secured an ally in Mrs. Pritchard. He had timed his visit well, but he knew that Hester had gone off for the day, and it was an opportunity he could not let slip. He arrived at the Pritchard bungalow soon after tiffin, and, after a little beating about the bush, said—

"I wonder, Mrs. Pritchard, if you have any idea of what it is I wish to say to you?"

"I fancy I have," she answered with a smile. "Unless I am very much mistaken you want to talk about Hester."

"How do you know?" he exclaimed quickly.

"Why, surely, Captain Sandon, you don't

suppose that I haven't made good use of my woman's eyes. I have noticed the attention you have paid to her; the sighs you have sighed, and the eager glances with which you have followed her movements."

"I am glad you have, I am glad you have," he said bluntly. "I think your sister is charming. She has quite captivated me."

"And have you captivated her in return?" asked Madge eagerly.

"No; I'm afraid not. It is that very point that has induced me to come to you. If you think I am worthy of her; if you think she would be happy with me——"

"I think you are quite worthy of her," put in Mrs. Pritchard, and encouraged him as he commenced to stammer a little, for, gallant soldier as he was, he lost his nerve somewhat when it came to the question of laying siege to a woman's heart. What honourable and conscientious man does not?

“I feel honoured and flattered,” he replied, “and I infer from what you say I need fear no opposition from you?”

“No, Captain Sandon, I will help you if I can.”

“Really this is an almost unhopèd-for stroke of good luck,” he answered, with an eagerness of expression that told how glad he was. “May I—may I venture to inquire if she has said anything to you that I might construe into—well—that is—has she ever uttered a word to you that would lead you to suppose I am regarded by her with any favour?”

“She has not, Captain; not in the sense that you mean.” The Captain’s face fell a little, and Mrs. Pritchard noticed it. “I know this, however,” she added; “she thinks you are a very agreeable man.”

“Is that all?” he asked, with a crestfallen countenance.

“Is that all! I really think, Captain, that is a good deal. When a young lady

thinks a gentleman is agreeable it is almost his own fault if he doesn't ultimately prevail upon her to believe that he is indispensable to her happiness. Hetty is a somewhat reticent girl. She has been strictly brought up ; and though she may not be lightly won, I am sure when she is won she will prove a treasure and the most devoted of wives."

The Captain looked delighted ; but there was a touch of anxiousness in his tone as he asked—

"Then do you think I may hope to win her ?"

"You may certainly try. My sister's heart I suppose is in her own keeping."

"But may I count upon your assistance ?"

"If it is in my power to render any assistance, you may certainly count upon me. I have no hesitation in expressing my deliberate opinion that her happiness would be safe with you. My husband, I know, has a very high opinion of you."

“Mrs. Pritchard,” answered the Captain, with a touch of solemnity, “if it should be my good fortune to win Hester, she will never have cause, if I can help it, to regret ever having become my wife.”

With a few more well-chosen sentences, Mrs. Pritchard did her best to still further encourage him to win Hester. She was half tempted to tell him there and then the little story of her sister's connection with Jack Hallett, but somehow she could not quite bring herself to do so, for she had managed to persuade herself that that connection was rather a slur on her sister's dignity, and detracted from her self-respect, so she held her peace. A little later Captain Sandon took his departure, feeling elated with what he considered his success so far.

Mrs. Pritchard, on her part, regarded Captain Sandon in the most favourable light. She thought that in every possible way he was a desirable husband for Hester, and one of whom her father would highly

approve. Every one who knew him predicted a future for him, and said that he would, if he got a chance, gain some of the highest prizes of his profession. Holding these views, she determined to speak to Hetty at the very earliest opportunity, for strangely enough she thought that, as Hester never now referred to young Hallett, she was ceasing to think of him. Before the opportunity she wanted occurred, the receipt of a letter from her husband, who was on his way home from Bombay, strengthened her hands very much—at least, that was her idea. That night she went to her sister's room, and the two sat together, and Madge said—

“I got a letter from George to-day, and there is something in it that will interest you—well, that is, it will painfully interest you.”

“What is it?” asked Hester, with a catching of the breath, as instinctively she guessed that the “something” had refer-

ence to Jack; that it might even be news of his death, for he was on active service in Persia, and a soldier on active service necessarily carried his life in his hand.

“Well, dear, I’ll read what George says in his letter. This is it.

“‘I met a Major Tonkin in Bombay a few days before I left. The poor fellow has been invalided from the seat of war in Persia, and was waiting for a ship in which to return home. I asked him if he had come across young Hallett. He told me he had; and he also told me he had heard that on the passage out from England Hallett had been in disgrace. It appears from what I gathered from Tonkin that Hallett, having drunk not wisely but too well, quarrelled with a brother-officer, and unmercifully pummelled him. Of course an inquiry was held, and on the arrival of the ship at her destination the young fellow was reported to the Commander-in-Chief, and there was quite a scandal about the affair.’”

During the reading of this bit of informa-

tion Hester closed her eyes, and her lips quivered with the emotion she could not altogether stifle. Mrs. Pritchard waited for her sister to speak, but as she uttered no word, the lady added—

“What a truly disgraceful thing, to be sure. It is shocking to think that a young man on the threshold of his career should make a blackguard of himself like that. I am sure, Hetty, you must congratulate yourself on being rid of such a fellow, and you will give father credit for having acted wisely.”

Hester made no comment or remark of any kind in answer to what her sister had read, but said—

“Madge, I am so tired. I want to go to bed. I wish you would leave me.”

Madge was surprised, and even disappointed, but she complied with the request, and kissing her sister, she bade her good-night, and retired. Then the poor girl turned the key in the door, and her fortitude giving way, she threw herself on the

bed, and wept piteously. It seemed to her as if a great darkness had come into her life; as if the idol she had worshipped had crumbled into the dust which henceforth and for ever she must water with her tears.

CHAPTER XII.

MAKING AN ALLY.

WHETHER this weeping was the result of sorrow, shame, a sense of degradation, disappointment, or what, was not then to be made manifest; for days passed, and she said nothing. It may be imagined that Mrs. Pritchard was more than surprised; she was annoyed and vexed. It was not pleasant to have to confess to herself that her sister was not disposed to make a confidante of her, and it was equally clear that she did not intend to ask her advice or take counsel with her in any way. That wounded the good lady's *amour propre*. As an elder and married sister, she considered it a duty on the part of her young unmarried sister

to look up to her, to be guided by her ; in short, to obey her. Mrs. Pritchard liked to be obeyed. In that respect, and in many other respects, she took after her father. She was somewhat self-opinionated, she was inclined to be dictatorial, and she had a very firm belief in the wisdom of her own judgment. Hester, however, had *her* views, and it was very apparent that in this particular juncture of affairs her views did not coincide with those of her sister. Nor was it easy then to find out what those views were, as she kept them to herself, and the only indication she gave that she was at all affected by the news of Jack's disgrace was in a certain thoughtful expression and a preoccupied air. Her behaviour to her friends and relatives in no way altered. She loved to be with the children, to romp with them, to listen to their childish prattle, to read to them, to display an interest in their toys.

Mrs. Pritchard, in spite of her annoyance and vexation, had the good sense to make

no further reference to Hallett, and what she thought was, that Hester felt humiliated and ashamed at having been associated with the young fellow, and that silence under the circumstances was the wisest—in fact, the only proper course.

For some little time after his interview with Mrs. Pritchard, Captain Sandon had no opportunity of taking any means to strengthen his position with regard to Hester, for his regimental duties kept him actively employed; moreover, he was sent to Delhi in command of an ammunition escort.

In the meantime Colonel Pritchard returned from his mission to Bombay, to the intense delight and joy of his wife, though that joy was doomed to be but short-lived. Of course they had many things to talk about, and Madge lost no time in telling him that she had read to her sister that portion of his letter which referred to Hallett.

“How did she take it?” asked the Colonel.

"She received the news in silence."

"But did she make no remark?"

"None whatever."

"Surely she said something."

"Not a syllable."

"Well, upon my word, she is a queer girl."

"The fact is," pursued his wife, "I suppose she felt so utterly ashamed that she thought it was wiser to keep silent. For what could she say?"

"Ah, very likely; and her idol having crumbled, she will soon forget him. It's astonishing how soon girls do become infatuated. But the infatuation just as soon wears off when they find they have been deceived."

"Of course it does," answered his wife, with an air of wisdom, "and I am sure Hetty is not a girl to go and throw herself at the head of a scamp."

"Well, it is to be hoped she is not," the Colonel remarked, also looking very wise.

"What I should like to see her do," con-

tinued his wife, "is to encourage Sandon, for there is no doubt he is quite gone on her."

"Well, she couldn't make a better choice. Sandon is an excellent fellow, and I shouldn't be at all surprised if he is able to write K.C.B. after his name some day. He's got the stuff in him, and if he gets the chance he will be heard of. He is the fellow to win the V.C. too. I know he is thought a good deal of at head-quarters, in spite of his strong prejudices."

This was all very pleasant to Mrs. Pritchard, in her self-assumed *rôle* of match-maker for her sister, and she had persuaded herself that Hester's ultimate acceptance of Sandon was only a question of time. But time often disarranges men's plans and proposals. And the time was then at hand when the call to arms, the din of strife, and the shock of battle were to give such an awful sternness to life in India, that love-making, courtships, and matrimony would form no part of it. But no living soul in

Meerut at that moment had any idea that the long-threatening storm was on the very point of bursting, not even the natives themselves. It is true the mutterings had been growing louder of late, but those in command quite believed that if anything did happen it would be a mere flash in the pan, and that they were quite prepared to cope with it, and nobody surely believed that more firmly than did Lieutenant-Colonel Pritchard. This view was also fully shared by General Hewett, the Commander-in-Chief of the Meerut Division. Hewett was a brave man and a good soldier, but, like many others throughout India, he displayed a remarkable obtuseness with regard to the signs that were everywhere making themselves manifest. It was a fatal obtuseness, and terrible indeed were the consequences to be.

Captain Sandon returned from Delhi, bringing with him a large supply of ammunition from the enormous arsenal of that city. And that evening, as soon as he was

off duty, he hastened to Pritchard's house, for he had heard that the Colonel had returned. Of course the two comrades greeted each other warmly, and it was but natural that the conversation, in the course of the evening, should turn upon Delhi. At that period the great city of the Moguls was the military storehouse for the whole of Upper India. But even this statement cannot convey an adequate idea to the mind of the reader of the incalculable quantity of ammunition, small arms, shot, shell, great guns, little guns, and all the instruments of destruction and warfare that had accumulated there.

"It amazes me," remarked Sandon, "that the authorities should be so supine about that tremendous arsenal. Why, if an attack in force was made upon it by the natives, Lieutenant Willoughby and his little band couldn't hold it for six hours."

"My dear boy, what a dreadful pessimist you are," laughed Pritchard, for he was always ready to ridicule his friend's fears.

“Depend upon it, if the powers that be dreamed for a moment that there was any danger of the Delhi arsenal falling into the hands of the natives, they would not lose a moment in strengthening the garrison. But such a danger only exists in the heated imaginations of certain gentlemen who have persuaded themselves that there is a widespread dissatisfaction throughout the native army. For myself, I do not believe anything of the kind. A few malcontents have made fools of themselves, and a few more may continue to make fools of themselves, but you may rely upon it, Sandon, that we shall put them down with such a strong hand that we shall soon cease to hear any more grumbling.”

Sandon was not the man to be lightly argued out of a position he had taken up. Less prejudiced in favour of the natives than his comrades in arms, he saw with different eyes, and the signs which those comrades were inclined to sneer at seemed to him very ominous indeed.

“Well, Pritchard, I tell you what it is,” he answered, as he puffed the smoke from a choice cigar, and watched it curl upward in the languid air towards the brilliant stars that burned in the hazy Indian sky. “Unless I’m a veritable prophet of evil, we shall soon have an opportunity of determining who is correct, and it will then be seen what we Englishmen are made of. My visit to Delhi has rather opened my eyes. Why, could anything be more ridiculous than keeping an old puppet of a king there? The last of the once powerful Mogul rulers sitting in his marble palace in lonely state, presents the natives with a sentimental picture of fallen greatness, and his name will furnish them with a rallying-cry. And suppose the natives did make good their hold on Delhi, with its circle of fortified walls, seven miles in extent, how long would it take us to recover this old seat of the Mogul Empire, do you think?”

“I don’t think it’s necessary to work out that problem,” replied Pritchard, in the

light-hearted manner that was customary with him, "for the natives won't make good their hold on Delhi, or anywhere else. But as I'm going to Delhi, I'll study the problem on the spot if you like, and let you know my answer when I come back."

"You are going to Delhi!" exclaimed Sandon.

"Yes."

"When?"

"Well, in the course of a day or two, I expect."

"Am I at liberty to ask what takes you there?"

"Oh yes. It's no great secret. Hewett is desirous of being furnished with an accurate report of the ordnance stores in the arsenal."

"Does *he* anticipate danger there?" asked Sandon.

"Bless your soul, no. I believe it is simply to gratify a whim of the Quarter-master-General, who has asked for a return."

The conversation was interrupted at this

point by the entrance of the ladies on the verandah. Captain Sandon sprang to his feet, and drew chairs up for them. But Mrs. Pritchard said to her husband, no doubt in pursuance of a little plan she had prearranged unknown to any one—

“I wish you would come to my room, George. I want you to read some letters I’m sending home. The mail goes out to-morrow, you know.”

“So it does, by Jove!” exclaimed her husband, as he sprang up. “I must write too, for I’ve got to give old Fenton some instructions about that bit of property of mine down in Devonshire.”

“Will it be boring you, Captain, if I ask you to entertain my sister for a little while?” said Mrs. Pritchard, addressing her guest.

“Boring me! Oh dear, no,” cried the Captain joyfully, experiencing an overwhelming sense of gratitude to the lady who had thus so cleverly managed to afford him the opportunity he had long been

craving for. But, as if she saw through the little plot, Hester put in—

“But you know, Madge, I ought to write to the old folks as well as you.”

“I’ve said all there is to say, dear,” answered her sister. “You can send by the mail that goes out next week. Besides, we cannot leave Captain Sandon to smoke in solitude. Pray keep him company, and catechise him severely on the number of hearts he has broken in his time. Don’t let him escape easily now, but just worm the secret out of him.”

Hester recognized that, without being positively rude, she could not escape from the situation, and so with a sigh she yielded, seating herself in the chair the Captain had placed for her. As Pritchard left the verandah, he said jokingly—

“I hope, Sandon, old fellow, you will survive the infliction of my sister-in-law. I’ll send the khitmurghar out with some brandy-pawnee to keep your strength up.”

“Infliction!” repeated the Captain, as he

seated himself as near Hester as propriety permitted. "As though it could be an infliction to me to be alone with one so charming as you are, Miss Dellaby!"

"Oh, pray, Captain Sandon," she sighed, with something like a sneer, "pray don't flatter. I hate flattery. I always think it is a sign of a weak mind."

"Miss Dellaby," replied the Captain gravely, "acquit me, I beseech, of any desire to flatter. A man who sincerely admires a woman does not resort to the stupidity of paying her merely idle compliments. My admiration of you is not a thing of an hour's growth."

"You must not talk like that," she said. "You mustn't say you admire me."

"Why not?"

"Because I cannot listen to you."

"Is it a crime for me to confess that I have come to regard you with feelings of more than ordinary interest? For a long time you have occupied a large share of my thoughts."

"It may not be a crime, but——"

"But what?"

"It is distasteful to me."

"I am sorry to hear that—deeply and truly sorry." He spoke with such obvious feeling that she was quite distressed, and could not find it in her heart at that moment to interrupt him. Perhaps she was not altogether averse on that beautiful Indian night, with the brilliant stars watching, and the air heavy with the fragrance of a thousand flowers, to listen to a confession of love from one who was regarded as the handsomest man in the station. The situation was not without a touch of romance in it, and it might have accorded with her humour of the moment. Whether this was or was not so, she remained silent, and he construed her silence as a happy augury. "It is now a good many weeks since I first met you," he went on. "During those weeks I have been much in your company, and you have impressed me as no other woman has ever impressed me before."

"I wonder to how many women you have said the same thing?" murmured Hester, ironically.

"On my soul and honour I have never said it to any woman on earth," he exclaimed, with a display of sincerity.

"Perhaps all those you have vowed the same vow to have died off, then," she remarked, with a light laugh. "You may be what is termed 'a lady-killer.'"

"Miss Dellaby, pray don't trifle with me. I am serious. Up to my meeting with you I had never formed an attachment of any kind. It may seem strange, but it is true. In all my wanderings I have never met a lady who has made the same impression upon me as you have done. I am stating an absolute fact."

"Then I am unfortunate, Captain Sandon."

"Unfortunate! Why?"

"Because I cannot reciprocate your feelings."

"But perhaps you will in time," he answered eagerly. "I have the honour and

privilege to enjoy the close friendship of your sister and her husband, and I have reason to think they would throw no obstacle in my way if you will only say that I may hope. I represent an excellent family. I have ample means, and could retire from the army to-morrow. I took up the profession of arms because it had a fascination for me, and not from necessity. I have hitherto endeavoured to so order my life that no man can honestly assail my honour ; and I am vain enough to suppose I am not altogether deficient in those qualities which a soldier and a gentleman should possess. It is not good, perhaps, for a man to recommend himself even to the lady he is desirous of wooing. But——”

“Captain Sandon,” exclaimed Hester, interrupting him, “I should be doing you a wrong, no less than wronging myself, if I listened to you any longer. I know that you are a man of honour, that you are a gentleman, that you are rich. My sister has told me these things. For the rest I have eyes to

see, and sense enough to form an independent judgment. My friendship, my highest respect, if they are worth anything, shall be yours, but I cannot give you anything else. I am going now to try and enlist your sympathy; I am going to appeal to your honour. I am going to throw myself on your generosity. I sorely need a friend—you look astonished, but it is true—and I want you to be a friend to me.”

She displayed more outward emotion than it was customary for her to do, and she had to cease speaking for a few moments. He took advantage of this pause to remark—

“Miss Dellaby, next to being something dearer to you than a friend, I shall consider it the highest honour to be regarded by you as your friend.”

“I want a friend,” she said energetically; “for, astounding as it may seem to you, I feel at this moment friendless. At any rate those from whom I might expect sympathy and consideration show me none, and my sister and my brother-in-law—pray don’t

think me bold in what I am going to say, but it is far better the truth should be told than that there should be dissembling and deceit—they desire that I should allow you to make love to me, and I am bound to say this, it is because they are very fond of you themselves, and they believe that my happiness would be safe in your keeping.”

Captain Sandon bowed, but remained silent. His face was thoughtful and grave, and he smoked with the air of one who was thinking deeply.

Having taken the plunge, having so far committed herself, Hester felt that retreat was now impossible, and as her position had recently become intolerable, she determined that the truth should come out.

“The fact is, Captain Sandon,” she continued, “I am not free to listen when you speak of admiration for me, because my love is given to another man, to him I am pledged, to him I will be true.”

Something very like a sigh escaped from Sandon’s lips as this revelation was made,

and a look of distress swept across his handsome face.

"I gather from what you say that you are engaged to him?" he remarked.

"I am."

"With the knowledge and consent of your people?"

"Not with their consent. They are all opposed to him."

"Including your sister and her husband?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"For reasons it is not quite easy to explain without going into minute details, and I do not think it is necessary to do that."

"Where is this fortunate man?"

"In Persia."

"In Persia!" echoed the captain, elevating his eyebrows.

"Yes, he is an officer. He recently joined the 20th, which, as you know, has been sent out to Persia."

"Am I at liberty to ask his name?"

"You are. His name is Hallett—John Hallett, and I first met him in Edinburgh, where he was quartered with his regiment."

"And what do you wish *me* to do, Miss Dellaby?"

"I want you to understand what I mean when I say I am friendless."

"I think I do understand. Your friends do not approve of your connection with this young man, and they desire that you should give him up."

"That is so; but I cannot, I will not give him up. Therefore to you as a man of honour, as a gentleman, I appeal not to say things to me that pain me."

"So be it," exclaimed the Captain, with a sigh. "I cannot turn a deaf ear to that appeal, though it is very much like asking me to jump on my own heart, for—let me say it this once—I am desperately in love with you, and this disappointment, for disappointment it is, will make a difference in my life."

"But you will soon meet somebody who

will be far worthier of you than I am," remarked Hester.

"Ah, a girl always says that under similar circumstances, as though she thought all men are as fickle as an April day. I have seen a good deal of the world, and known many women, but never met one before I met you who screwed herself into my heart as you have done. I have dreamed you might be mine. The dream is over. So be it; but believe me something has gone out of my life. The world does not appear to me in quite the same colour it did half-an-hour ago."

He spoke so seriously, so mournfully, and withal really looked so sad, that Hester could not help but pity him. And she said in a kindly tone, at the same time mechanically putting forth her hand—

"Poor fellow, I am so very, very sorry that I am the cause of making you unhappy. But what am I to do? It is not my fault. I cannot love two men."

He took her outstretched hand, and held

it between his, nor did she attempt to withdraw it.

"No," he answered, "it is not your fault. You are the innocent cause. Your beauty, your sweetness, your charming disposition have made me your slave. But a slave cannot command; he must obey. I will obey you."

He carried her hand to his lips and kissed it two or three times, and that act was witnessed by Mrs. Pritchard, who at that very moment appeared in the doorway. She looked very charming herself, clad as she was in white, and with the soft light in the room behind her bringing her shapely figure into relief. Hester caught sight of the white dress, and turning, beheld her sister. Like one suddenly detected in a wrong, she reddened to the roots of her hair and drew her hand hastily from Sandon's grasp. Mrs. Pritchard's first impulse was to steal silently away again, but her presence being detected, she laughed and exclaimed—

"I declare if you young people are not making love to each other. How very romantic and sweet."

Captain Sandon rose and stammered out something, and Hester said quickly—

"No, Madge, you are wrong."

"There, there, my dear child," retorted Mrs. Pritchard, in her pleasant, laughing manner, "I've got eyes, dear, to see with, I've caught you in—let me see, what is that dreadful Latin sentence?—oh, *flagrante delicto*. Is that correct, Captain?"

"Yes, I believe your quantities are right," laughed Sandon.

"But why be ashamed?" continued the lady. "I am sure it is very nice for you to play Juliet to Captain Sandon's Romeo on such a delicious night. The air is faint with the smell of flowers, and the garden is jewelled with the fire-flies; seldom have I seen the stars so brilliant, while everything is so still, so beautiful. These are the poetical accessories to a love scene. It's really too affecting, and makes me wish that

I was a sentimental girl again instead of an old married woman with two children, and a big soldier husband to look after."

"Really, Madge, how ridiculous you are. I tell you we were——"

What she was going to say was left unsaid, suddenly cut short by the report of a rifle not far off. This was followed by the fierce shouts of men, then there was another shot, and another, and another.

The laughter faded from Mrs. Pritchard's lips as the colour faded from her face, and flinging her arms about her sister, she murmured in nervous dread—

"God help us ! what does that mean ?"

Captain Sandon, who was in mufti, half started forward as Colonel Pritchard came rushing on to the verandah exclaiming—

"What was that ? what was that ?"

At that moment the clear, silvery notes of a bugle—a sentry call—rang out on the night air.

"I don't know what it is," answered Sandon calmly and collectedly, but with a

significant glance at his friend ; “ I will go and ascertain what it means.”

“ Stay,” said Pritchard, “ you are unarmed. I will lend you a sword.”

“ No, thanks, I don’t think it necessary,” said Sandon, not wishing to alarm the ladies, and without displaying the slightest sign of trepidation, he descended the steps that led from the verandah to the garden and disappeared in the darkness.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT JHANSI.

FOR some moments after his friend had gone Colonel Pritchard stood irresolute. Then he said—

“I think I had better follow him.”

“No, dear, don’t,” said his wife pleadingly, as she put her arms about him.

He laughed and patted her head.

“Why not?” he asked.

“Because — because — well, I feel quite nervous to-night. I don’t know what has come over me.” Then calling one of the native servants to her, she said—
“Dundo, run along the road a little way, and see if you can ascertain what that firing meant.”

The man salaamed, and went down the garden.

“Let us go in, dear, and look at the chicks,” said the Colonel’s wife as she took his arm and that of her sister, and led them into the house. But when the Colonel reached the room and had glanced at the sleeping children, his face became more thoughtful, and with a certain sternness of resolution he remarked—

“Madge, I have no right to stay here if there is anything wrong outside, and there is something wrong, or those shots would not have been fired and the sentry alarm sounded, though perhaps it is nothing more than a drunken row.”

“Go then,” she answered, with forced composure; “I have no right to detain you.”

He kissed her and left the room. He had scarcely got away from his own gate, however, when he met Captain Sandon returning.

“I am glad you are back,” he exclaimed. “What is the bobbery about?”

“Well, so far as I’ve been able to ascertain, it appears that two troopers of the 3rd Bengal Native Light Cavalry have been on the spree for the last day or two, and hiding in one of the bazaars. A picket of the 60th Foot were sent to find them and bring them in. Having discovered them, they were conveying them to barracks, when the ruffians suddenly sprang on their guard, seized two of the rifles, and tried to shoot some of the guard down. In this they failed, and were fired upon in return, with the result that one was seriously wounded. They are now, as I understand, safely lodged in gaol.”

“I am glad it is nothing worse than that,” remarked Pritchard in his usual cheerful manner.

“It’s bad enough in all conscience,” returned Sandon. “It shows how strong the mutinous spirit is amongst the black rascals.”

“Tut, man, what an alarmist you are, to be sure,” answered Pritchard, with a scorn-

ful little laugh, for he so firmly believed in the fidelity of the native soldiers generally that he could not bear to hear even his best friend speak doubtingly of them.

“No, I am not an alarmist,” was the decisive answer, “but I see without prejudice, and think without bias. I tell you, Pritchard, there is an evil day dawning for India. The black devils mean mischief. We want a man now at the head of affairs with the mind of a Wellington and the boldness of a Napoleon.”

Pritchard answered his friend quite angrily.

“Really, Sandon, I am amazed that you should be so pessimistic. There is nothing, absolutely nothing, to justify the alarm you manifest——”

“Oh, pray, my friend, don’t think I am alarmed,” cried Sandon, interrupting the other. “Taking a purely selfish and personal view of the matter, I hope we may have an opportunity of teaching these natives a severe lesson. I have a murdered

brother to avenge, and if the opportunity should arise for me to strike, you may make a bet I'll strike hard and sure."

"Well, you'll have to wait a long time, old man. But come, don't let us alarm the ladies."

"Trust me; I shall not do that," answered his friend.

The two officers entered the bungalow, and hearing their footsteps, Mrs. Pritchard and her sister rushed forward to learn the news, and plied Sandon with questions.

"A mere brawl, I assure you, ladies; nothing more. Such little incidents are part of the everyday life in a military station like this."

Captain Sandon spoke lightly, though he did not think lightly of the matter; and though his friend had dubbed him a pessimist, it would have been a good thing for India if there had been many more like him at that time. The "little incident" of that night was but the prelude to the great tragedy upon which the curtain was

about to rise. It appeared that the two men who had been arrested as deserters were brothers named Chuna. The one who was wounded in the *mêlée* died the same night, and the survivor by some unaccountable means managed to break out of barracks again before the day dawned, and getting clear of the city he fled with all speed to Jhansi, where his people lived, and where we must follow him.

Jhansi was a singularly picturesque city, strongly fortified, and at that period was nominally ruled by the Ranee, who was then a widow. She was, however, a mere puppet, for Jhansi had really been annexed by Lord Dalhousie; but the Ranee was allowed to keep up some empty semblance of her former state, though the handsome money allowance offered her by the Government she indignantly declined, and in many ways she had shown that she was a bitter and uncompromising enemy of the British. Yet startling and strange as it seems, it is nevertheless true that the garrison we kept

in her little kingdom was made up entirely of natives, with the exception of about half-a-dozen European officers or so, in addition to a "resident" and a political agent; but in spite of these two officials it is surprising how very little was known of the true state of native feeling in the deposed Ranee's dominions. The Ranee was like a tiger deprived of its young, but the white people believed she was a caged tiger, and therefore could do no harm. She was not, however, as harmless as was supposed. Her stronghold was a powerful place if she could but get control of it. The fortifications were armed with some comparatively heavy guns, and the natural advantages of Jhansi as a place of defence were very great indeed. What was wanted was a body of resolute and trained troops and plenty of ammunition. Given these and the fortress might have held out for a considerable time. But the Ranee was a shrewd, calculating creature, and she saw that even if she succeeded in

winning the allegiance of the native troops quartered in her town, it would be useless to attempt to fight the British single-handed. If a general rising could be assured, then Jhansi would play no unimportant part in the great struggle. All unknown, of course, to the white conquerors, the dusky queen had been sending out spies to different parts of the country, and they were instructed to report to her how the vast conspiracy progressed, and if the native troops throughout India were unanimous in wishing to throw off the British yoke. It will be understood from this how ready the Ranee was to receive any one who could supply her with reliable information, and so when Chuna entered the city after his rapid flight from Meerut, and sought an interview with the deposed ruler, he had no difficulty whatever in gaining admission to her presence.

Seated in a gorgeously-decorated room of her palace the Ranee received the man,

who, in accordance with Eastern custom, prostrated himself before her.

“Your name is Chuna?” said the Ranee.

“It is, your Mightiness, and in this city was I born, and here for long have dwelt my people.”

“Rise, Chuna. You have been a soldier in the service of the Company Bahadoor?”

“I have.”

“And you love the service?”

Chuna ground his teeth. His dark face was filled with an expression of intense hatred, and his eyes burned with the fire of suppressed passion.

“Great Ranee,” he exclaimed, “I had a brother who up to a few days ago was strong and well as I am. We hated the white rule and wished to free ourselves of it. We met one of your emissaries and listened to what he told us. Then my brother and I vowed a vow by the sacred Gunga that we would devote our poor lives in trying to free our country from the oppressor. We went into the bazaars at

Meerut; we spread the news that a great day was dawning for our land, and that the hateful British would be swept into the sea. We preached in our humble way the doctrine of defiance and revolution. We told our countrymen that we were slaves, but by a united effort we could be free, when from the Himalayas to the mouth of the Hooghly would go forth the great shout that the Company's Raj was over."

"You spoke well. You are a brave man. You will become a great one," answered the Ranee. "Proceed."

"While we were engaged in our mission," continued Chuna, "white soldiers were sent to arrest us. In shame and humiliation we were being conveyed back to the barracks, where we should have been loaded with chains and ignominiously treated. We exchanged signals together; we understood each other; we made a spring at our captors; we seized two of their guns and made a bid for liberty. Alas, alas, great lady, some evil spirit went against us.

My brother fell mortally wounded by the fire of the accursed Feringhees. They carried him in a dying state to the barracks, where that night Brahma claimed him. I had obtained permission to sit with my wounded brother. When he was dead, and as the morning broke, I managed to elude the vigilance of the sentry and get free. I have come hither because my people are here, and it is my native place, and to offer you my humble services."

"You are a hero," answered the Ranee. "You shall have riches, and your people shall be made rich, if you can succeed in stirring your comrades and countrymen here into breaking their shackles of serfdom. But tell me, what is the feeling amongst our people in Meerut?"

"They but wait a favourable opportunity and an assurance that they will be supported."

The Ranee smiled bitterly.

"We must see if we cannot give them

our support," she said. "A spirit of fear has kept us down; but you shall tell the soldiers that the power we have feared is but a shadow that will flee before our fierce wrath. The bones of the accursed Feringhees shall strew our plains, and their blood shall fertilize our soil. Mata Singh"—she said to one of her attendants—"see that this man is well cared for. Then take means to get as many Sepoys here to-night as you can muster. Chuna shall address them. He shall tell them how weak the white Raj is, and how little effort is required to destroy it altogether. He is one of them, and they will listen to him. Like them he is a soldier under the Company, therefore his words will carry weight. If he wins the garrison here to my cause he shall be loaded with riches; and when my power has been restored his people shall have land and become rulers themselves. See to it, Singh, that my instructions are carried out, and if all goes well here, messengers shall speed to Meerut,

to Delhi, to Cawnpore to tell them that we only await their signal."

Singh, who was a handsome, grey-bearded old man who had been in the Rajah of Jhansi's service for more than a generation, made a low salaam, and beckoning Chuna to follow him, the two went out together.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE LEAVENING OF THE MASS.

AMONGST the high-caste natives throughout India no one had been more active in propagating sedition and inflaming the passions of the people than the Ranee of Jhansi, and the British had no more dangerous enemy than this remarkable woman. The old puppet of a king at Delhi, who sat on his golden throne surrounded with mock state, and trying to cheat himself into a belief that he was still a ruler, although in his heart he knew full well that the mighty power once wielded by the Moguls had gone for ever, hated the British as strongly as she did. But he was an old man. His energy was dead, his hopes

crushed, the grave was yawning at his feet, and in his senility he felt the uselessness of trying to subdue the conqueror. He was a king in name; the representative of a princely house which for centuries had been all but supreme in Asia; he lived in a palace; he had followers and a toy army; he was surrounded with luxury and the conditions of state. But it was all mockery to him. The theatrical monarch with his tinsel crown and foil-covered sceptre was not more powerless than he. Therein he differed from the Ranee of Jhansi.

Jhansi had ever been a small State, and the sway of its rulers was as nothing compared to the Moguls. But they had been a fierce and warlike people, and when the last Rajah died, and his widow saw that the British had destroyed her royal house, she was too fierce, too energetic, too martial to submit tamely and uncomplainingly as the white-haired old King of Delhi had done. She chafed, she fretted, she raved; nor was she at much pains to conceal her

feelings. But her fuming and raving were laughed at. She was regarded as a pigmy, and the white giant, conscious of his own might, treated her with contempt, and did not concern himself about her. It was one more of numerous fatal mistakes which the British had made, and those mistakes were to be paid for at a fearful cost.

As already stated, the garrison kept at Jhansi was composed entirely of native troops in charge of some seven or eight British officers. In common with the discontent which had shown itself in so many places, the Jhansi garrison had murmured and growled, but they had been afraid to take the initiative in any upheaval. They wanted the start to be made elsewhere, and as elsewhere entertained precisely the same idea, it seemed as if there was not likely to be any widespread outbreak. The Ranee had done her best to overcome this difficulty. She was wealthy, and was able to pay her emissaries well, and her restless, fiery nature

would not allow her to remain quiet and submissive under what she considered a great wrong.

The arrival of Chuna seemed to her singularly opportune. She knew how a little leaven could leaven the whole mass. Here was a Sepoy, a fugitive, a deserter, whose life would be sacrificed if he were retaken. His brother had been killed, and he was burning to avenge that brother's death. Such a man, the Ranee saw at once, might prove invaluable, and help her to carry out her fell designs. So she resolved that the utmost use should be made of the instrument which fortune had thus placed in her hands. That night, owing to the exertions of her hirelings, she got together a large number of the Sepoy garrison. They assembled in the large hall of her palace, and every precaution had been taken to guard against surprise, while the fidelity of her servants was beyond doubt. The soldiers had not come in a body, but one, two, and even three at a time. This was

done in order to avoid arousing any suspicion. But the British officers were enjoying their mess as usual, and never dreamed of danger. On the contrary, the commanding officer being a great shikaree, he and his comrades were planning a shooting expedition for the following day, and it was decided that a polite request should be sent to the Ranee for the loan of some of her elephants.

When all had assembled in the palace who were likely to come, Chuna was brought forward, and the Ranee, raising her voice, said—

“Friends and countrymen, behold here one of yourselves—a soldier like you ; and up to a few days ago a slave like you. You wince. You don’t like the word slave, and yet are we any better than slaves? This man’s brother was shot down before his very eyes, and he himself escaped by a miracle. He has come here to his native place—to his people. He has sought safety and shelter with us. Say, shall he be

dragged forth again to be butchered by these dogs of English?"

Only a murmur answered her question. The spirit of fear still held the men in its thrall. They were in truth afraid of each other. Then the Ranee looked appealingly at Chuna, and he spoke. He was an imposing man—a true Sikh, with the fierce martial bearing of his countrymen. His voice was full and round; his manner impressive.

"Brothers," he began, "we are Oudh men, and our country has been stolen from us."¹

¹ The large province of Oudh, it is perhaps unnecessary to remind the reader, had been annexed under Lord Dalhousie, to the intense dissatisfaction of the landowners and of the people generally. Four-fifths of the population of Oudh were Hindoos, and from this source the Bengal army was principally supplied. The Oudhmen, being a warlike race, made splendid soldiers, and were quick and apt at learning English drill. They were fearless riders, excellent swordsmen, and at first seemed to take kindly to the new condition of things. Up to the time of the Mutiny the native regiments were made up almost entirely of Oudhmen.

The dusky faces around him lit up with passion at these words, and white teeth gleamed, as men were moved by an emotion they could not conceal. One powerful fellow, a duffadar (sergeant) stepped forward a few paces, and, biting his nether lip for a moment, he said, as he made a salaam to the Ranee—

“True, O brother; my people owned a little land, and were contented. But it was taken from them. Therefore they were robbed.”

“And yet you serve the white Rajah, although your royal house was destroyed, your king deprived of his rights, and his subjects made slaves to a foreign ruler,” remarked the Ranee, with a scornful curl of the lip.

“We serve the white Rajah because he conquered us,” remarked the man sullenly.

“But the conqueror may be conquered,” the Ranee said.

The men remained silent, but they looked at each other. Although they hated the

foreign rule, the power of the British was to them incalculable. They were afraid of it, and yet the fire smouldered within them. It only wanted fanning into a flame. None knew this better than the Ranee, and hence her motive in utilizing Chuna to play upon their feelings.

“Brothers,” said Chuna again, “the dufadar has spoken. He and his people were robbed. You have all been robbed, and in the old days we were wont to sally forth in our might, and smite those who robbed us into the dust.”

“Aye, aye, it was so,” murmured the soldiers with a certain sullenness, which seemed to indicate that they wanted very little more to stir them into fury.

“Think of it, men,” put in the Ranee. “You have been robbed; we have all been robbed; and while we are as numerous as the sands of the sea, the robbers may be counted by scores. Oh, my dead ancestors, I blush as I think of it.” She covered her face with her hands, and appeared to be

overcome with emotion. She was a good actress, and no one knew better than she how to appeal to men's feelings.

"It is so," answered the duffadar, as he glanced round at his brother-soldiers. "The great lady speaks truly. We are many; our rulers are few. Yet do we remain silent and inactive."

"It shall be so no longer," murmured his listeners.

"Ah, you speak like soldiers and heroes now," said the Ranee. "Chuna, tell them what you know, and see if you can stir into a flame the fire that smoulders in their hearts."

"I have come from Meerut," said Chuna.

"And what report bring you?" asked several.

"A good report."

"Speak it then, that we may hear and act," remarked the duffadar.

"Our brothers there groan beneath the yoke as you groan here. But they await your help."

"And we wait theirs," put in the duffadar.

"It will be given when you have sworn to support them even to the death."

"We swear it; we swear it," cried all.

"A few nights ago," went on Chuna, "my brother was shot down before my eyes. His blood cries aloud for vengeance."

"And he shall be revenged," murmured the men.

"We want something more than words. We want acts and deeds," said the Ranee.

"But we wait on Meerut," answered the duffadar, speaking for his fellows.

"And Meerut will rise when it knows that it can count on Jhansi," said Chuna, growing more excited. "Let us make a start, and when once the fire catches, not all the might of the British will be able to extinguish it. Go back at once to your barracks. Tell your comrades that on them our freedom depends, then seize your guns, and let not a white man or woman or child escape. Do this thing this very night, and when

the Feringhees are butchered we will hasten to Meerut ; our arrival will be Meerut's signal, and then woe betide all who carry a white skin."

His dusky listeners had caught his excitement, and they looked dangerous now, and as if they were itching to rush off and put Chuna's suggestion into execution. But that would not have suited the wily Ranee's book. If the Sepoys went away who would defend her kingdom ? What she hoped was this, that Meerut and Delhi would rise simultaneously. Then the British would be too much occupied to trouble her. It would be with them a desperate struggle for their very lives. In the meantime she could consolidate her position, extend her rule, and organize a powerful native army of her own. But to let the native garrison that then held the place go, would be to lose what little she then possessed.

"Chuna speaks wisely, but counsels not well," she said. "We must make no move

until the Feringhees are engaged defending their worthless lives at Meerut, Delhi, and Cawnpore. We are not powerful enough to drive these white devils into the sea. But we can send to our brothers at those places our oath of fidelity to the cause. What you have to do is to stir up your comrades, and when to a man you have sworn to stand by me, our secret messengers shall go forth to the other towns, and through all the bazaars, and amongst all the native regiments. They shall spread the glad tidings that our swords will fly from their scabbards at their bidding. When they strike we will strike too. But my kingdom here must be built up. That which has been taken from me must be restored. The Rajahs of Jhansi have been all-powerful in the past, they must be still more powerful in the future. Say, my brave friends, shall this be so?"

"It shall, it shall," they exclaimed in chorus.

"Ah, now does my heart begin to beat

true again," the Ranee said. "Chuna, we owe you much. Here shall you lie concealed and in safety. And since you must have many friends in Meerut, you shall send them secret messages by the fakirs. You shall tell them that we are ready and willing, and the first shot that is fired in Meerut shall be the signal for the death of every Feringhee here. Their doom is sealed, but they shall live on until their hour strikes. It is not just yet. Rashness will undo us. Like the cobra of our jungles we must move silently ; like the tiger strike swiftly and crush at once. Say, good people, are we agreed on this ?"

"We are."

"And you will carry out my instructions ?"

"We will."

"You make me glad. I could cry aloud for very joy. And now, hearken ; as earnest of what I intend to do for you, every man of you, before you leave here to-night, shall receive twenty rupees. That is

nothing to what you may expect if you serve me well. The Company Bahadoor give you no more than will buy you rice, but I will make you rich, every mother's son of you. And now go. From this very hour begin to prepare the mine, but fire it not until I give the word."

The prospect of getting twenty rupees each, which to these men was a large sum, aroused them to such an extent that they rushed forward and struggled with each other to kiss the Ranee's hand. She got rid of them at last. Then she bade one of her attendants summon Rhabdool. In a few minutes a little, weazened old man entered. His hair was long and white; his beard and moustache like driven snow. He wore a long, loose robe of muslin, fastened at the waist with a piece of cord. He was ostensibly a fakir or mendicant priest, but in reality a spy and messenger in the service of the Ranee. Fakirs were privileged people all over India. No one thought of molesting them. No one ques-

tioned them as to whither they were journeying or whence they came. They were free as the winds, and, wandering as they did through the bazaars of the towns and villages they visited, they gathered up the news and bore it on. In the days preceding the Mutiny, all unsuspected by the British, these fakirs wandered from place to place, keeping in touch with all the budmashes (rascals) of the towns and stations, and secretly spreading the report that the British were to be driven from India in 1857, in fulfilment of an old prophecy. It can well be understood how such men would be made use of as spies and firebrands by those who had no other safe means of communicating with the people.

Rhabdool salaamed to the Rancee.

“You have work for me,” he said.

“Yes. Behold this man. His name is Chuna. He is a soldier. His brother has been butchered before his eyes, and he has fled hither for safety. You will journey to Meerut with messages from him. Speak,

Chuna, and say who are your trusted friends there."

"I belong to the 3rd Bengal Light Cavalry," said Chuna.

"Yes," answered the weazened-faced little man, as he folded his hands on his breast and looked so mild and gentle that no one unacquainted with him would have suspected that he was one of the most insidious enemies of the English, and as bloodthirsty as the most ferocious Sepoy. "Proceed. I listen," he added.

"In that regiment I have many friends."

"Their names?" asked Rhabdool, as, laying his forefinger on his temple, and closing his eyes, he listened attentively. Like all his class, he had a most excellent memory.

Chuna mentioned the names of many men in the regiment, and as each name was uttered Rhabdool tapped his forehead, as if to impress the name indelibly on his brain.

"Tell these friends of mine," went on

Chuna, "that if they remain in the Feringhee's pay they will be defiled, and cast out for ever and ever from Brahma's presence."

"What mean you?" asked the Ranee, displaying great eagerness as she guessed that there was something more in the man's remark than appeared on the surface.

"I mean that their caste is to be broken."

"How broken?"

"The cartridges served out to them for their carbines are to be greased with hog's fat, and since these cartridges must be bitten with the teeth, the biters will be defiled, since no true Hindoo can taste the fat of pigs and remain whole."

The Ranee shuddered. It was either a real or an assumed shudder.

"This is horrible," she murmured.

"Most horrible," added Rhabdool.

"And yet it is true," remarked Chuna, with a fierce expression and flashing eyes.

Rhabdool drew his little figure up to its full extent of inches. He seemed almost,

as it were, to undergo some change. The mildness of his expression had given place to one of ferocity. He looked dangerous, and as if he were capable of performing any deed, no matter how bloodthirsty. He snatched from the folds of his robe a strip of dirty, greasy parchment, attached to a string that was round his neck. On the parchment were written some verses from the Hindoo bible. He pressed the parchment to his shrivelled lips, and said, with an angry snarl—

“Hereon I swear that I will rest not until I have informed these men of the devilish attempt to destroy their souls. An they be men and not cravens they will rise like a whirlwind, and sweep these damnable Feringhees from the face of the earth. Yes, Ranee; yes, Chuna! It shall be done. My old heart beats with youthful vigour as I enter on my task. Woe, woe to them, I say, who have attempted this thing.”

“When will you go forth?” asked the

Ranee, with a look of joy beaming on her dusky face.

“This very night; and I will sleep no more until I have warned these poor children of the awful peril they stand in. With fire and sword they must purge the land of the accursed white man.”

“Go,” said the Ranee, “and may Brahma aid your efforts—sow the wind, so that the whirlwind will be irresistible.”

She dismissed Rhabdool, Chuna, and her attendants; and when she was alone she laughed to herself and rubbed her hands gleefully.

“All goes well so far,” she murmured. “With the coming of Chuna has come the dawn of a better fortune for me. Jhansi shall be mine again, and the power of its ruler shall be mightier than ever.”

So dreamed the treacherous Ranee, and through the darkness of the night the fanatical fakir travelled on his way to Meerut.

When the morning dawned the few officers in charge of the garrison rose full of their hunting project, all unmindful of the danger that threatened them. A polite message was sent to the Ranee to say how much obliged the officers would be if she would lend them three of her elephants for two days' shooting, and she replied that it would give her unspeakable pleasure to comply with the request of the gentlemen, and the elephants would be prepared and sent forthwith.

And during the time that the officers were absent on their excursion, the lump of leaven was doing its work, and amongst the native regiments in charge of Jhansi and in the pay of the Company the ferment ran. Those who had been at the Ranee's palace told how handsomely she had behaved, and how she had promised to make them all rich. Then certain men in the regiment were secretly appointed to be leaders, and the others swore a sacred oath

that they would stand by them to the death. It was next arranged that some morning, when the troops were assembled for general parade, and assuming that Meerut had taken the lead, a signal was to be given, and every officer shot down. Then the women and children were to be put to death. That done, the fortifications were to be strengthened, and the absolute rule of the Ranee restored.

Thus the plot was hatched, and thus was every white soul there condemned to death. The signal for their execution, or rather let us say murder, would come from Meerut. A week later the officer in command at Jhansi received a "service" letter from Bombay, of which the following is a copy :—

"A young lieutenant named John Montague Hallett, late of the 20th, now serving in Persia, having resigned his commission in that regiment owing to some scandal, has been sent down here in charge of a batch of

invalids. As he has expressed a desire to join the Punjaub army, he is, by order of the Commander-in-Chief, to be posted to your regiment, and is now on his way up country. His abilities as an officer have been favourably reported upon, but he wants keeping in hand."

CHAPTER XV.

DIPLOMACY.

THE escape of the prisoner Chuna from Meerut was not regarded as a very serious affair, although the sentries on duty at the prison hospital where the wounded man lay dying, and where with unusual leniency and indulgence the other deserter had been allowed to be with his mortally-wounded brother, were at once tried by court-martial, and two of them sentenced to imprisonment. For it was perfectly obvious that these two men must have connived at the escape, or otherwise been singularly lax in their duty. In either case they had been guilty of a breach of military discipline, and so were made an example of.

The punishment awarded, however, was very mild, for up to then there had been a desire on the part of those in authority to treat disobedience lightly. It was thought that kindness and indulgence would have a better effect than severity. Never was a greater mistake made. The Oriental mind looks upon anything in the shape of leniency or concession as a sign of weakness and fear. The past rulers of the East have ever ruled with a rod of iron. The word has been followed by the blow the moment there was the faintest sign of disobedience. Thus the people have been kept in subjection. They are used to it. It is the discipline they appreciate, the discipline they respect.

It is true that since the dark and sanguinary days of the Mutiny we have given the masses a freedom they never enjoyed before, but at the same time we have deprived them of the power for mischief. That one tremendous weapon which was turned against us with such awful effect, the native artillery, has been done away

with. That arm of the service is now entirely in the hands of the British, and while the number of British officers in the native regiments has been largely increased, the number of the native officers has been as largely decreased. Profiting, too, by the bitter lessons which the Mutiny taught us, we no longer leave important stations to be garrisoned entirely by native troops, with only a handful of whites to look after them. And, moreover, we have succeeded in convincing princes, rajahs, and other high-caste natives that their interests are bound up in ours. But so far as the masses of the people are concerned, it is doubtful if they are yet reconciled to our rule; but though they are numbered by hundreds of thousands, they recognize their weakness, for they have no arms, and no one to marshal them in battle array. Without arms, and without leaders, how could even their mighty numbers prevail against the relatively small British army stationed in India, and which, though small, is one of the best-drilled, best-trained, and

best-equipped armies in the world, and not to be dislodged even by the might of Russia?

The exciting little incident of the death of one of the brothers Chuna and the escape of the other having been got over, the everyday life in the station of Meerut resumed the even tenor of its way, and the flirting, scandalizing, church-going, and parading went on as usual. Mrs. Pritchard recovered her spirits, which had been somewhat dashed, and in a few days her husband started for Delhi on special service, expecting to be absent for a fortnight. During that fortnight, however, many things were to happen.

Although Captain Sandon's suspicions concerning the natives had not abated one jot, he resolved for the moment to keep his views to himself, as the weight of the white opinion in the station was largely against him. And he also resolved not to relax his endeavours to win Hester Dellaby, for he had really spoken truly when he said no

other woman had ever influenced him as she had done. That he was a gentleman in the best sense of the word was certain, and it was equally certain that he was a gallant and brave soldier, with all a soldier's instincts, and he believed, as most soldiers do, that all is fair in love and war.

Hester had appealed to his honour, and had asked him to befriend her. He was not likely to jeopardize that honour, which he prized so highly, and his friendship had in a sense been pledged. But she had told him her lover was in Persia, and that all her people objected to him. Being in Persia, where a conflict was then going on, the chances were she might not see him again. And even if he came through the fortunes of war with a whole skin, there were also strong chances that the objections of her people would prevail, and she would give him up. Whichever way it was, Sandon decided that he was justified in holding himself ready to step into the breach, and to be ready to do that was to so ingratiate

himself in the girl's favour that she would readily change the friend into the lover. As a man of the world, he knew that girls in their youth believed that their love for some particular man could never change, but in a little while they found out that what they thought was love was merely infatuation, that died out with the absence of the object that produced it. He relied upon this occurring in Hester's case. He quite thought that time—and but a short time—would serve to disillusionize her, and she would feel annoyed with herself for ever having regarded her attachment for Hallett in any serious light.

On the understanding that had been arrived at between them, Hester was glad of Captain Sandon's attention, and her sister saw with silent pleasure what she believed was the commencement of an engagement, and she encouraged it in every possible way. She was fond of Sandon, and her husband was fond of him, and they both felt that if Hester would have him it

would be an excellent match. Of course the affair soon came to be the talk of the station. Gossip of this kind was a toothsome morsel for the ladies as they met at their respective tea-fights, and such remarks as the following were freely indulged in :—

“I wonder if there is anything serious between Miss Dellaby and Captain Sandon ?”

“No, I should think not,” answered a certain Miss Clifton, daughter of one of the staff-surgeons, and who, it was notorious, had herself tried to hook the handsome Sandon. “The Captain is a frightful flirt, and as hollow-hearted as he can be. I pity the girl who gets him ; besides, I should think a man like him would look somewhat higher than a girl of Hester Dellaby’s standing. He is simply amusing himself, that’s what he’s doing.”

“I think you are wrong, dear,” remarked another lady, who was said to lead rather a cat-and-dog life with her husband. “The Captain’s serious enough in my opinion,

but, of course, if he married Miss Dellaby he would very likely tire of her in six months. He is not the man to remain true to any one long; in fact, all men are deceivers. They are a bad lot. If I had my time to come over again, I wouldn't trust one of them."

"They are not such a bad lot if you know how to keep them in hand," remarked a big stout lady in spectacles, who was said to rule her husband with a rod of iron.

"Oh, I think men are just delightful," chipped in a pert miss of nineteen, but she was promptly frowned down and sat upon, and no doubt regretted that she had spoken.

Amongst the men generally the opinion was, "Sandon's a deuced lucky fellow," and that Hester was the handsomest girl in the station. Many of the young subalterns sighed their hearts out with envy that they had no chance of competing with the handsome Captain for possession of the station prize, for so Hester was regarded.

Of course, the talk that was so freely

indulged in was not likely to escape the ears of Mrs. Pritchard, and that lady considered, as her sister's guardian, that it was her place to have a definite understanding with Sandon as to what his intentions were, and, with all the artfulness of her sex, she contrived to get the opportunity to do this, without seeming as if she was trying to force his hand or that of her sister. In fact, Hester had shown a determination not to give herself away, and, having every faith in the Captain, she determined that Mrs. Pritchard might form any opinion she liked.

The opportunity came about in this way. She persuaded Hester to accept an invitation that had been sent to her to accompany some friends on a day's excursion, and in the course of the afternoon Mrs. Pritchard drove to the house of the chaplain, where she happened to know Sandon was to be. After the usual tea and small talk, she rose to go, and asked Captain Sandon if he was going back to his quarters, volunteering to

drop him on the way. Although he had shared a seat in the buggy of a brother-officer coming out, and would have returned that way, he gladly availed himself of the lady's offer.

After some preliminary conversation, she opened fire by remarking—

“I quite miss Hester now when I drive out alone, for I have got so used to having her with me.”

“Yes, I suppose you do,” he answered. “She's gone off for the day, I understand.”

“Yes, but how did you know?”

“I heard it from the Richardson girls.”

“There is not much one can do in the station without its being known,” said Mrs. Pritchard, with a little laugh.

“No, there is not indeed. Gossip is essential to the well-being of ladies.”

“That reminds me, Captain, that the attentions you show to my sister have become the subject of common gossip.”

“Oh, that is very likely. In a place like this the old women must have something

to talk about. They would die if they had not."

"Yes; but it's not pleasant to have one's name made the subject of scandal at tea-fights."

"My dear, Mrs. Pritchard," said the Captain, with an air of unusual seriousness, "my idea of life is that it is too short and too interesting to fritter any portion of it away in listening to the mere tattle of irresponsible chatterers, who talk because they have nothing better to do. You and I can surely afford to be indifferent to paltry frivol."

"Oh, I quite agree with you, but still one should endeavour to avoid giving these chatterers opportunity to wag their silly tongues."

The Captain shrugged his shoulders.

"If one thought of that, one would have no time for anything else," he said sententiously.

"I am not so sure about that, Captain Sandon."

"But I am. Pardon me for differing from you. For myself, I care not what people say."

"But you are a man," she exclaimed, as though she thought she had scored a point.

"And you are a lady, and a very charming lady too," he answered, with his pleasant laugh.

"Oh, pray don't be ridiculous, Captain Sandon. You know well enough what I mean."

"A man who always knows what a lady means is a clever man indeed," said Sandon laughingly.

"Really you are most tantalizing. I must be blunt with you then, and express a hope that you will respect the good name of my family."

"I trust I shall always do that, Mrs. Pritchard."

"Remember that I am Hester's sister."

"She is to be congratulated on having so excellent a sister."

"I shall certainly have to take you to

task, sir, if you prevaricate in such a way. You know quite well what I am alluding to. You mustn't talk a lot of silly nonsense to the girl, and turn her head."

"Mrs. Pritchard," answered the Captain, with that decisiveness of tone which he adopted when very much in earnest, "I leave the silly nonsense to be talked by the gossips of the station. As for turning the girl's head, I don't believe I could do that. She is too strong-minded."

"I am glad that you think so. But what I want to understand is this, have you any serious intentions about Hester?"

"My intentions are always serious, Mrs. Pritchard. I am a serious man."

"You are a most tiresome one," she cried.

"I am sorry that *you* think so."

"You know you are, and you are just playing with me. Men always think they can play with women."

"That remark is not fair to yourself and not just to me," he answered.

"Very well, then; to be perfectly frank, do you not admire my sister?"

"I have admired her almost from the first hour I saw her."

"And does she admire you in return?"

"Ah, that is a question that you ought certainly to be in a position to answer much better than I can."

"No, that is not so, for my sister does not make a confidante of me; she tells me few or none of her secrets."

"Perhaps she has none to tell."

"Oh, yes, she has. But what I want to know, Captain, is this, does she reciprocate the feeling you entertain for her?"

"I am presumptuous enough to think that my company and conversation are not altogether distasteful to her."

"Ah, now we are getting at it. In other words, you are both falling over head and ears in love with each other."

"I can only speak for myself."

"Then you admit *you* are in love?"

"I do not deny it certainly."

“Come now, that’s a confession. And when a man falls in love with a woman, he hopes, I suppose, to ultimately win her for his wife.”

“Well, I’ve generally understood that the goal of the lover is matrimony.”

“Is it *your* goal, sir? I have heard it said you are not a marrying man.”

“That is another illustration of how often strangers know more about one’s business than one knows one’s self,” answered Sandon ironically.

Mrs. Pritchard was annoyed, though she concealed this annoyance. She was a good tactician in her way; at least, she had always thought so, but she had certainly been worsted on this occasion, and Sandon had parried her questions with great skill. She was resolved, however, to make one last effort to draw him out, and, putting on her pleasantest smile, she said—

“I cannot help remarking, Captain Sandon, that my sister is a very impressionable girl, therefore I hope you will not trifle

with her feelings for the sake of amusing yourself."

"Mrs. Pritchard, you can rest perfectly sure I will not do that."

This answer seemed to her more satisfactory than any he had yet given, and it encouraged her to go a step further. In a half-pathetic, half-confidential tone, she remarked—

"I think, Captain, under all the circumstances, I am justified in letting you into a little secret. My sister, it appears, has had some flirtation with a young fellow at home, of whom her father and mother strongly disapproved, and of course it could not be expected that I should oppose them, so when Hester told me about the affair I was quite angry with her, and said she must think no more of him. Of course, it has been a mere bit of calf love, such as occurs between an irresponsible girl and boy, but very likely at the time she thought it was all real enough. However, she has quite got over it by this time."

Captain Sandon evinced no surprise, as the lady expected he would do, and she had been watching his face narrowly to see how he received the information, but he said quietly—

“I have heard the story.”

“You’ve heard it!” she exclaimed, there being no mistake about her surprise. “From whom have you heard it?” Then, before he could answer her question, she burst into a laugh, saying—

“Oh, why, of course, my sister told you.”

“Yes; she related the incident to me.”

“Did she tell you that the young fellow had gone to Persia?”

“She did.”

“Then, if she has so far made a confidant of you, Captain, it is very certain you must have succeeded in ingratiating yourself very deeply in her favour, and I trust she will never have reason to think she has misplaced her confidence.”

"I don't think she will," was the only answer the Captain made. However, Mrs. Pritchard was quite satisfied. She felt that she had scored a very good point, and that in a short time she might be able to announce a formal engagement between her sister and the gallant Captain Sandon of the 6th Dragoon Guards.

By this time they had entered the cantonments, when they became aware of some commotion going on. Mrs. Pritchard pulled up her horse, as the road was filled with a noisy, excited crowd of budmashes and a picket of carabineers, who were driving a strange-looking old man before them. He had a long white beard, and was garbed as a fakir. The expression of his weazened little face was one of supreme contempt, and his hands were folded on his breast, as if he felt he was a martyr, and he was trying to impress the crowd with his own views.

Captain Sandon jumped down to see what

was the matter. In a few minutes he returned to Mrs. Pritchard, who had waited with the buggy.

"What is it?" asked the lady a little anxiously.

"Oh, nothing serious; it appears that the dirty little old fakir has been found two or three times in the native lines against orders, and when told to leave he spouted treason in the presence of one of the native companies. The General in command has therefore sent word that he is to be driven out of the town."

"I think that is a pity," answered Mrs. Pritchard. "These fakirs are very dirty and great rascals, but I think it is a mistake to take any notice of them."

"That's a lady's idea," smiled Sandon, as, shaking her hand and raising his topee, he bade her good-evening, as he was going to his own quarters, which were in the opposite direction to her bungalow. So she drove away, and he walked on, pushing

some budmashes who stood in his path roughly on one side.

The fakir who was being driven from the town was Rhabdool of Jhansi. The date was the 23rd of April, 1857.

CHAPTER XVI.

A WARM DISCUSSION.

THAT evening Captain Sandon dined at his mess, at which there was an unusual gathering of officers, amongst those present being Colonel Carmichael Smith, commanding the 3rd Light Cavalry. The conversation in the course of the evening turned upon the incident of the fakir; and Captain Sandon, in his usual brusque and pronounced manner when speaking of the natives, expressed his views very forcibly. He did not hesitate to call a spade a spade where the natives were concerned.

“We are far too lenient with these blackguards,” he said. “What ought to have been done with that wretched fakir was to

hang him in the presence of a general parade of the native regiments. That would have taught them a lesson."

Colonel Smith laughed.

"I doubt it, Sandon," he said. "Violent measures do no good. Besides, I doubt if the fellow made the slightest impression on the soldiers who listened to him."

"And so do I," chimed in another officer.

"You see," began a third, "Sandon's a comparatively new comer. He doesn't know the natives as well as we do."

"Gentlemen, you are like the people who live at the base of Vesuvius," answered Sandon quietly. "They view the mountain with contempt, and though they know it has caused havoc in the past, they don't believe it will ever do so again. Well, I confess that is a kind of fool's paradise that I've no wish to occupy."

His remark was greeted with laughter, and the iced champagne was circulated more freely.

“By the time you have been in the country another six months,” Colonel Smith remarked, “you will have changed your views. You will have discovered by then that these natives are very much like children—humour them a little, and you will get a lot out of them.”

“And give them the rod occasionally and they’ll obey you better,” Sandon replied. “The rod is an excellent corrective for children.”

“Not a bit of it,” put in a young medical officer named Parker, who was rather fanatical on matters of religion, and who had made himself somewhat notorious by his attempts to proselytize the natives. “Not a bit of it, Sandon,” he repeated. “I’ve seen a lot of India, and a command of the language of the country has enabled me to understand the thoughts and feelings of the inhabitants better than men who cannot converse with them. I maintain that they are a noble-hearted people, and as truly Christian in spirit as we who are professing

Christians are. In fact, some of us who call ourselves Christians act and speak as if we were the most violent barbarians. Some men seem to forget that all men are flesh and blood, and the same God made us all—black and white.”

This was a severe thrust, and for a moment Sandon flashed an angry glance at the young fellow who had had the boldness to thus beard him, but breaking into a scornful laugh he said, with withering sarcasm—

“ Well, all I’ve got to say is this, you pap-fed Christians have a lot to answer for, and when the tug comes, as come it will sooner or later, I hope you will not hide yourselves away in your feather beds. God helps the man who helps himself, and, for my own part, I have infinitely more faith in dry powder and conical bullets than in the effort of trying to permeate the dense mind of the native with a doctrine which to him must seem ridiculous. My own experience is that men who talk the loudest about

their Christianity are generally the greatest cowards, and the least to be depended upon. We want fighting men in India, not preachers of twaddle. This country must be ruled by soldiers, not old women."

The young doctor fairly started in his seat, and a look of insulted pride swept across his pale, insipid, and characterless face. He seemed inclined to make some angry reply, when Colonel Smith interposed—

"Gentlemen, gentlemen, *gentlemen!*" he exclaimed, "we must have no personalities, if you please. "Whatever your respective views are, I think it is better that you express them calmly, otherwise do not express them at all."

"But a man and a soldier must defend himself, Colonel, when he is attacked," replied Sandon, in his old pleasant manner.

"I did not attack you, sir," retorted Surgeon Parker, with a certain violence of expression, and feeling rather small, for he was conscious that he was no match in

any way for the burly, handsome Sandon, who was universally admitted to be a magnificent soldier.

"No; your attack was only a fizzle," answered Sandon. "I apologize for having taken you seriously."

"Gentlemen, *gentlemen!*" cried the Colonel again, and holding up his hands as if to deprecate any further discussion on the subject, "this contention really must not go on. Pray restrain your feelings. We all have our own particular views, and each man has the right to think as he likes."

"That is precisely the privilege I'm sticking up for," said Sandon, nothing abashed; "but I like to mete out the measure that is meted to me. However, to go back to the incident of the fakir——"

"No, no, pray let the subject drop," cried several voices.

"As you will, gentlemen; but I was only going to make one remark which may rather astonish you."

Sandon paused, as if disposed, now that he had roused their curiosity, to punish them by keeping them in suspense, but the Colonel said—

“What is it, Sandon? It strikes me we are not easily astonished.”

“Do you know what it was the fakir had been telling the soldiers?” asked Sandon.

“No,” “No,” “No,” came as a general answer.

“Well, it was—at any rate, this is what I gathered—that the cartridges served out to the troops here were greased with hog’s lard.”

A roar of laughter ran round the table.

“And do you suppose the natives believed it?” asked Parker somewhat timidly, and yet in a manner that seemed to indicate he thought he had scored a point.

Sandon did not condescend to answer the question direct, but addressing himself to the company said—

“Now, I hold that when the fanatical mind is inflamed with treasonable state-

ments of that kind there is no telling what the result may be. Therefore, I maintain we should have hung the rascal in the presence of all the regiments. It's no use fighting with kid gloves on. When you've got to fight, strip to it, and show your muscle."

"I certainly do think, Sandon, that you take rather an exaggerated view of the situation," said Colonel Smith in a kindly way. "For my own part, I don't believe if all the fakirs in India preached that nonsense that they would get half-a-dozen soldiers to believe them. Of course, we have heard it before, and some dreadful things have been predicted, but the predictions have fallen flat. All the Sepoys know perfectly well that the cartridges have been made regimentally, and that the lubricant used is nothing more dreadful than beeswax and clarified butter."

"In theory that is all right, sir," answered Sandon; "but you must admit that strange murmurs have been heard."

"I believe those murmurs were originated by the pessimistic whites," replied the Colonel.

Little Surgeon Parker laughed loudly, and mumbled "Hear, hear," for he thought that thrust must lay the dogmatic Sandon low. But not a bit of it. The gallant officer came up smiling again, and still ignoring the very presence of the doctor, he addressed himself to Colonel Smith, and asked—

"Are you disposed, Colonel, to put that to the test?"

"In what way?"

"By having a special parade of your regiment."

"To what end?" asked the Colonel.

"You shall speak to them about the cartridges."

"Yes."

"Point out to them that the fakir lied to-day, and that all the stories they have heard about greased cartridges are lies."

"All right. I follow you."

"Very well. Having read them a sermon,

you shall order them to load their rifles with the suspected cartridges."

"And what is likely to come out of that?" asked the Colonel, with an air of scepticism.

"That remains to be seen. If the men obey the order with alacrity, and bite their cartridges without manifesting any suspicion, I will frankly own that I am wrong. If, on the other hand, they refuse, you will give me credit for seeing better through a deal board than you do."

"All right, dear boy," exclaimed Colonel Smith in a genial, laughing way. "This matter shall be put to the test. There shall be a special parade of my regiment to-morrow for platoon exercise, and I am prepared to bet that when we assemble at mess to-morrow evening we shall have the laugh of you, Sandon."

"All right, sir. I shall take my defeat as a man should, but you must not forget that at Dum Dum, Barrackpore, and one or two other places, the native soldiers have

already shown a mutinous disposition with regard to the rumoured hog's fat in the cartridges."

"Well, yes; there have been some bobberies in those places, but I believe that the legend about the hog's fat was simply made a peg on which to hang other grievances," replied the Colonel.

"It may be so," returned Sandon, "but you can now put it to the practical test."

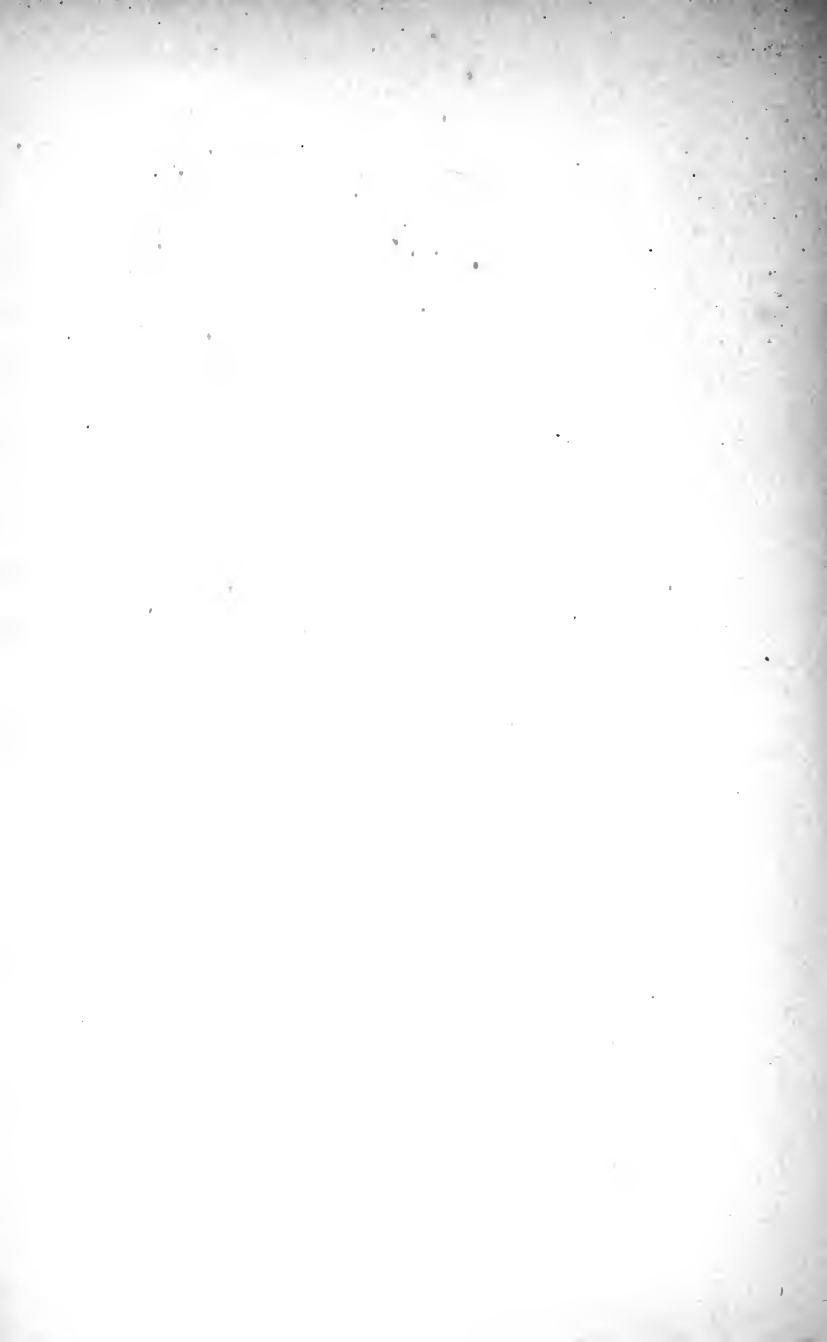
"Yes, and I hope you will prove a false prophet," the Colonel replied, as he sent an order for the orderly officer on duty to come to him, and when the officer arrived the Colonel gave him some instructions, and that done, he turned to his brother-officers, and said—

"That bit of business is settled. Special parade to-morrow morning at five o'clock for platoon exercise. And now, gentlemen, what do you say to a final peg? and then I think we may retire, for it's already past ten."

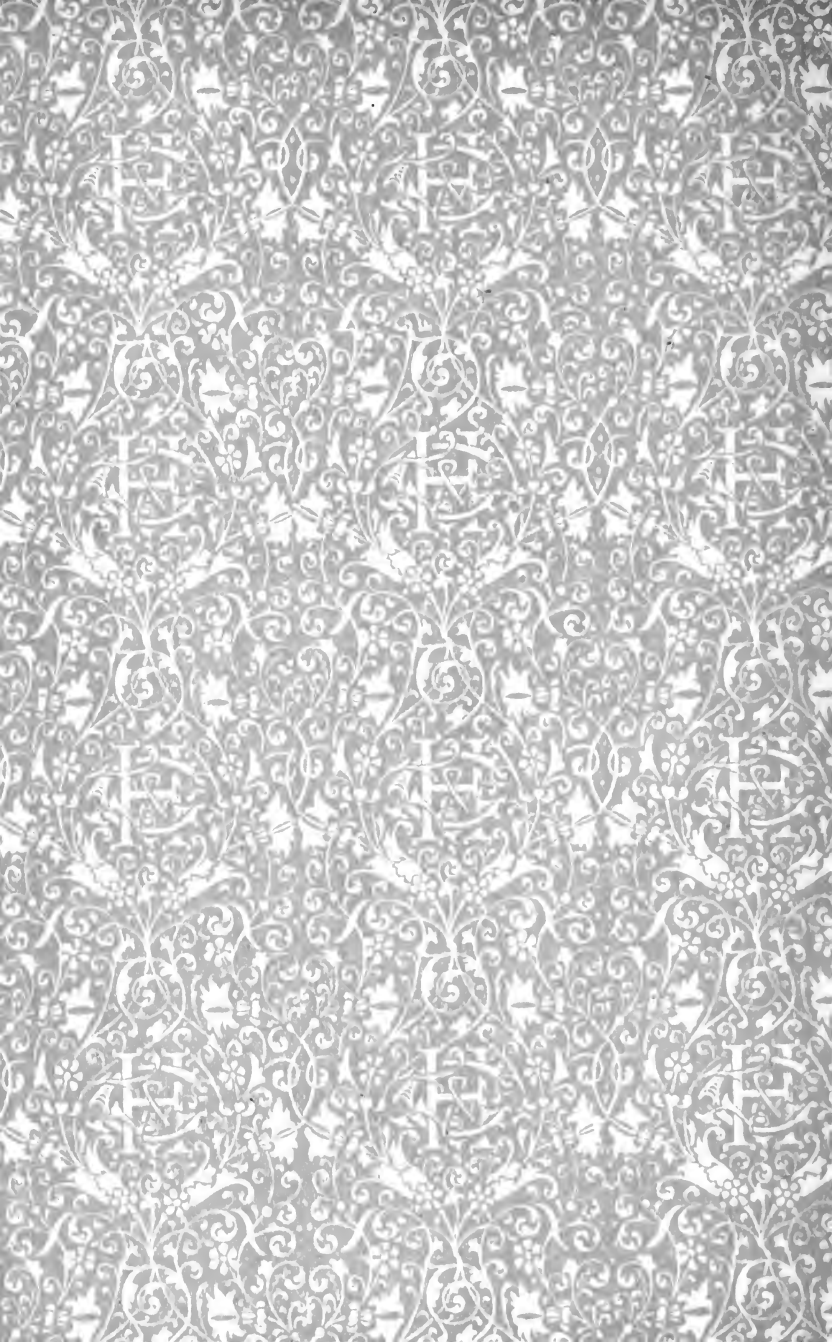
Brandy-and-soda being voted for all

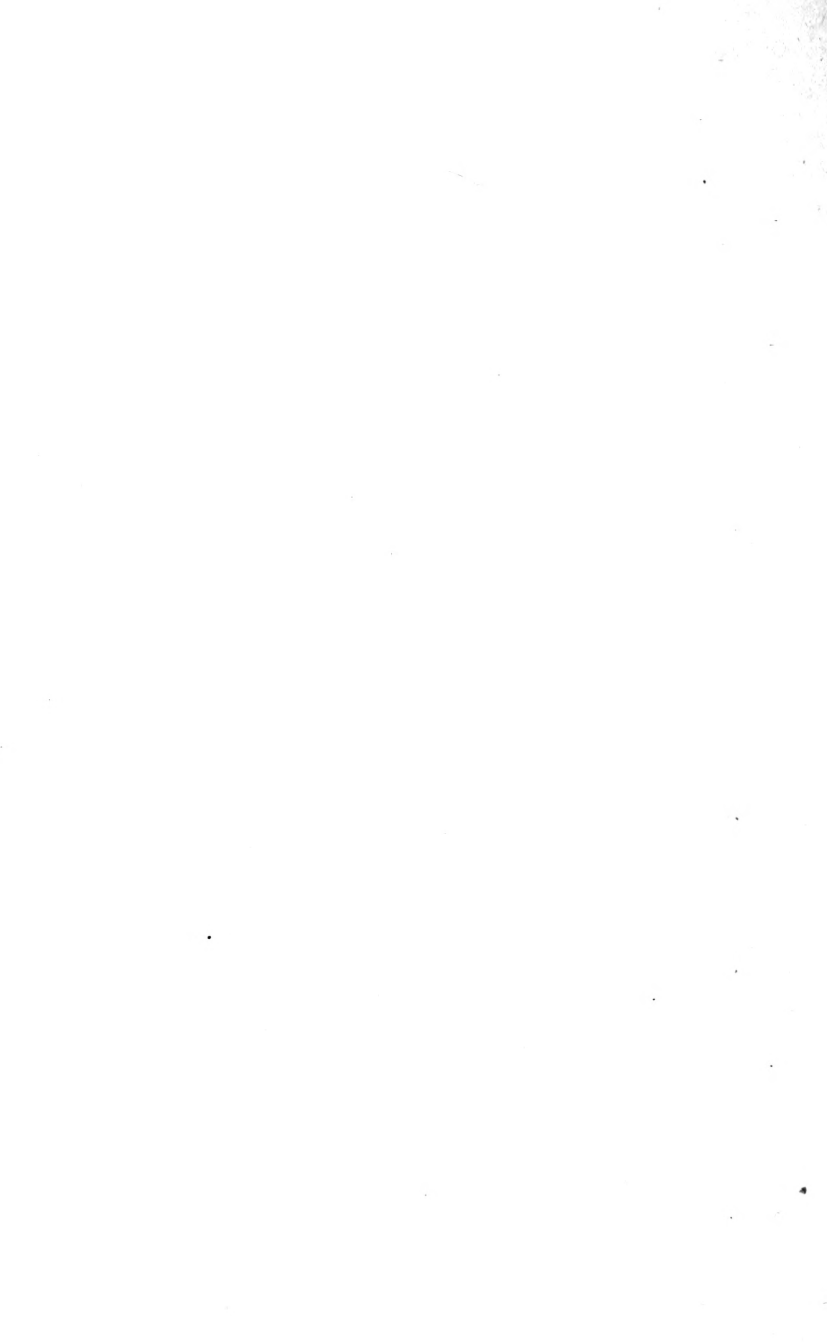
round, the khitmurghars proceeded to supply it, and half-an-hour later the mess was deserted; and the native servants—who had overheard the conversation, for many of them understood English—collected in little groups, and discussed the prospects of the fateful morrow.

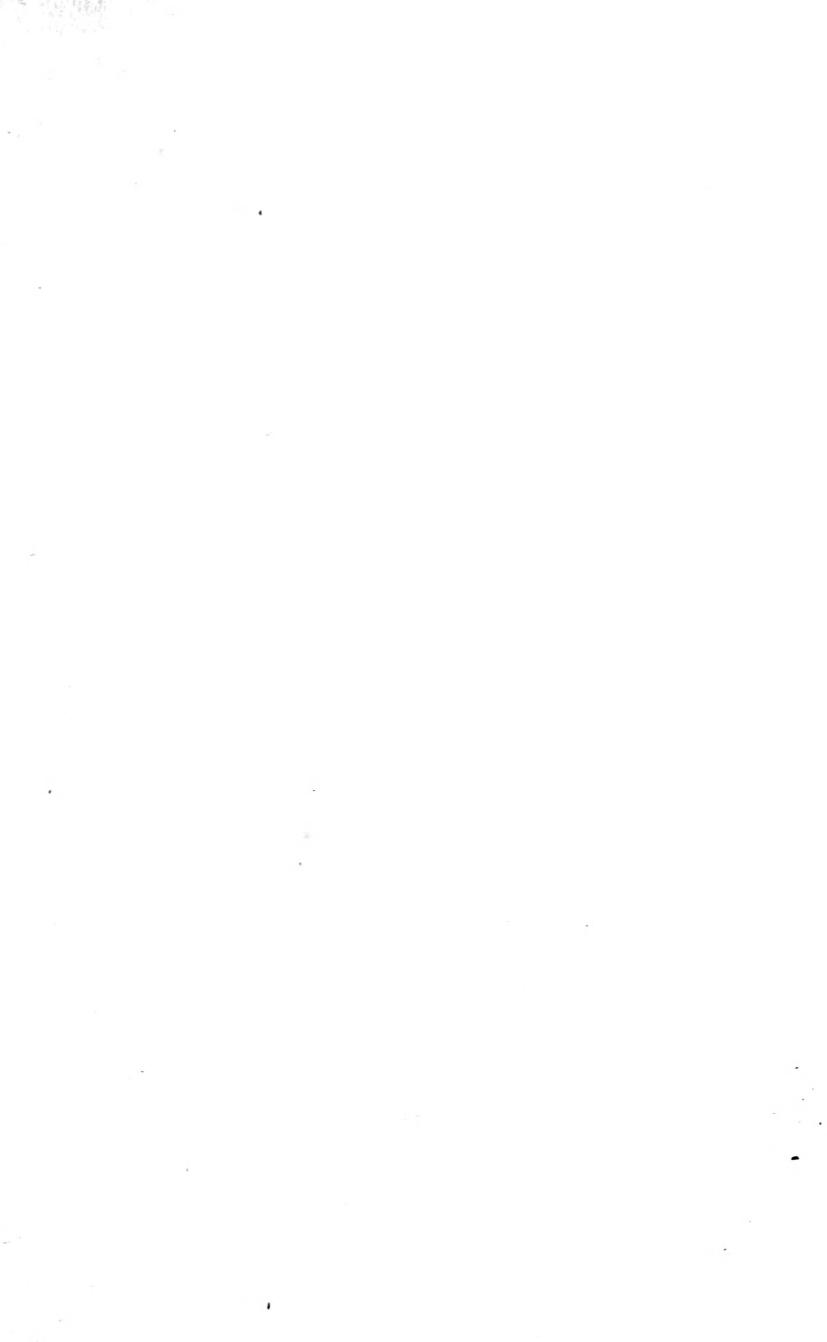
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